

United States Senate

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VOLUNTARY PUBLIC SERVICE: PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Today, you are sitting on the threshold of adulthood. You have already experienced success in your world; you have made a mark amongst your peers. Most of you feel confident that you can successfully pursue a career.

At the same time, you are standing at the beginning of a new decade. You are inheriting a world filled with uncertainties. The world is changing at a pace which is unprecedented in our history. While you have unlimited opportunities to shape the future, you face great challenges.

You must wonder how you will manage to prepare for these challenges. How do you learn to live in a world where nations are critically interdependent? How do you adapt to a world where resources are finite? How do you transform a society so that men and women can share equally the marketplace and the family? How do you shape the world so that you decide what technological advances should take place rather than letting technology decide what your lives will be like?

The trend today is for people to withdraw from participating in the world. We have already seen signs that the country is leaning in this direction. Two trends in the last election particularly concern me-- voter apathy and single issue politics. Voter turn-out in the last election was lower than in any year since 1948. The lack of interest of voters contributed to the success of those espousing a single policy or program. Our world is not so simple that we can be mesmerized into believing that our future turns on one single issue--whether it be abortion or the property tax.

There may be many reasons why people are turning inward. Watergate left some people permanently disillusioned about politics. Another reason for the inward turn is the economy. Dealing with the day-to-day reality of inflation has made people fearful about their economic future. As a result, many young people are planning their careers early, some even before they graduate from high school.

I don't want to discourage anyone from thinking about their future or from pursuing a career. However, once you become locked into a career, your career may become more important than your personal development. You may let your career define you before you are ready to decide what career best expresses who you are.

Several weeks ago a major study was released on a national volunteer service. The idea is to put young people to work for one or two years in serving others-- a service that would come before they become locked into careers. This service would be encouraged after high school or college graduation. It would be a

transition from school to work. I support the concept which would expand what Peace Corps, Vista and other domestic social service programs are already accomplishing.

The committee that studied the national service concept argued for it on the basis of its potential contribution to the volunteer's personal development and citizenship. The committee noted, "To make a healthy transition to adulthood, to work out an identity that included a sense of citizenship, and to affirm positive social values, young people need to become actively involved in the lives of others and the goals of society."

From my own experience, I believe this is true. When I graduated from Dartmouth College in 1962, I had no specific career goal. I chose to join the Peace Corps which would allow me to serve others by working in a developing nation. At the same time, I would be serving my country by enhancing the image of the U.S. abroad and I would gain an understanding of another culture.

The two years I spent in a small town teaching and living with a group of students had more impact on my life than any other event, including my college years. Those two years in Africa shaped my view of the world. They motivated me to become involved in public service. The contribution I hope to make as a United States Senator stems from my Peace Corps experience.

Too often, politicians, especially those of us in Washington, make public policy in a bureaucratic vacuum. We get engrossed in rhetoric and high level analyses about strategic arms control, the urban crisis, global politics and other major issues. We completely forget the human element. I feel strongly that my baptism in the Peace Corps has helped me retain the perspective of how policy impacts people's lives. To make sure that I never become insulated from that impact I come back to Massachusetts regularly to hold town meetings so I can listen to what people have to say.

However, you don't have to go as far as Ethiopia to gain what I gained from the Peace Corps. Others who have volunteered--in Vista or in other domestic service programs--have similar experiences which leave a lasting imprint upon their lives. You can learn about a different lifestyle and gain an understanding of other people whether they live in Appalachia, Roxbury or Africa.

The kind of mutual understanding which I am talking about is even more important today than it was in the sixties. Think about how interdependent nations have become today--willfully or otherwise.

The events in Iran may be thousands of miles away but we will feel them personally at the gas pumps this spring. We cannot isolate ourselves from a world where 82 percent of the oil reserves are in Arab, Communist and developing countries. Many of the raw materials we and other industrialized nations need are in Third World countries. The technological expertise and equipment we have is sorely needed by those countries as they work to raise the standard of living of their people.

The population explosion in developing nations is putting more and more strain on the world's resources. Yet, the United States--with only six percent of the world's population--consumes one-third of the world's energy.

Sometimes it is hard to see how this affects us personally. One example is the energy crisis. I am deeply concerned that many Americans don't grasp the severity of the crisis. In this case, the inability to understand our interdependency with the oil producing nations may affect our nation's survival as well as drastically alter the way we live our lives.

There are many reasons for a national service program. Such a program could offer one solution to the problem of youth employment. It could help direct young people away, from the disruptive influence of idleness, drugs, alcohol and crime, into positive pursuits.

A national service program can also help fill jobs in community and social action agencies. It could give us the opportunity to launch new programs-- such as an Energy Conservation Corps which I proposed last summer-- or to meet needs not being met with current programs-- such as an expanded day care program. The Energy Conservation Corps would educate the public about conservation and would participate in the search for new solutions to local energy shortages.

Lots of ideas should be discussed before we are ready to implement a national service program. Peace Corps, Vista and other voluntary agencies provide only 15,000 jobs a year. A successful national service envisions one million participants. We will have to find young people willing to fill the positions. Traditionally, Peace Corps and Vista have not attracted low income and minority youth. In the next decade, there will be more young people from these socio-economic groups and we will have to learn how to attract them into these service programs.

We need to debate whether the program should be voluntary or mandatory. I anticipate Constitutional questions about a mandatory program, although we have precedents such as the draft and compulsory education. Another possibility is to make the program an option to military service. There is a bill in Congress to set up new incentives to encourage military volunteers. This is because all four branches aren't filling their quotas. Discussions will also center on whether to pay a subsistence wage or minimum wage.

I hope that you will join me in debating these issues over the next six months. In the Fall, I will meet with young people across the state to see if we can reach a consensus about the program. Since you have already demonstrated leadership in your own communities, I expect you to take a lead in debating a national service concept. You will be serving your country.

The coming decade challenges us to work together to face the changes that lie ahead. Being involved with people on a daily basis teaches you to solve problems on a human scale. To my mind, this is the key to solving problems which await us in the 1980's.