

**Written Testimony of
Richard Stengel
Managing Editor, TIME Magazine**

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR
Hearing On
“Renewing America Through National Service and Volunteerism”**

After more than three months of secret negotiations during the sweltering summer of 1787, the founding fathers emerged from Independence Hall with a Constitution. As Benjamin Franklin stepped outside, a society woman accosted him and said, “Well, Doctor, what have we got?” Franklin replied, “A republic, madam, if you can keep it.”

A republic, if you can keep it. The Framers were not all that optimistic about the future of the republic. They understood that it was not a machine that would go of itself. What they knew was that for it to work, people had to be involved; they had to be active participants in a representative democracy. Otherwise, the republic would not keep.

A half-century later, the great French social scientist Alexis de Tocqueville published his book *Democracy in America* about his year in the United States. He famously wrote that “Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite.” He saw thousands of associations of ordinary people coming together to build hospitals and churches and schools. “Everywhere,” he wrote, that there is “a new undertaking, you see the government in France and a great lord in England, count on it that you will perceive an association in the United States.” America was something new under the sun. In the

Old World, there was no such thing as volunteering – everything was done by the monarchy, the aristocracy or the state. America basically invented democratic volunteerism and national service. Service is in our DNA as a nation and as a people.

These days, the two central acts of democratic citizenship are voting and paying taxes. But from the standpoint of the Founders and Mr. de Tocqueville, that is far from enough. For a while now, we have seen confidence in our institutions at all-time lows, but volunteerism and civic participation at modern highs. This would seem to be a contradiction, but it is not. People, especially young people, feel that the public sphere may be broken but that they can personally make a difference through community service. The challenge is to try to unite private and public purpose.

Today, we are at a unique moment in our history when we have an opportunity to mobilize Americans to help address critical issues facing our republic. We are fighting two wars overseas, and we are in the midst of an unparalleled economic recession. The parts of our economy that have the greatest need are the sectors that benefit most from service: education, public health and infrastructure. One way to keep the republic at such a difficult time is through universal national service – civilian and military. Whether that means addressing the high school dropout crisis or solving persistent public-health problems, national service is a kind of silver bullet that will help address our most intractable problems. It is neither Republican nor Democratic — it is beyond partisanship. And it is critical to show that

when it comes to national service, the return on investment is high and measurable.

Let's look at the landscape now. Nearly 61 million Americans volunteered in their communities in 2007, giving more than 8 billion hours of service worth more than \$158 billion to America's communities. More than a quarter of Americans over the age of 16 volunteered in some way. There were one million more volunteers in 2007 than in 2002. More than a third of volunteers served through religious organizations. 75,000 Americans are serving through AmeriCorps this year, and more than 540,000 have served in AmeriCorps programs since 1994. A cost-benefit analysis of AmeriCorps programs has concluded that every \$1 in investment results in \$1.50 to \$3.90 of direct measurable benefits to the community: children tutored, playgrounds built, homeless people fed. AmeriCorp volunteers mentored more than 210,000 children and youth last year.

It seems that America is at an inflection point when it comes to service. At this very moment, Americans are stepping forward in record numbers to serve. Applications for many national-service programs are three times what they were last year. Whether this is because of the economic downturn or record levels of voter involvement during the election cycle, we don't know. Probably both. After 9/11, there was a desire to serve and sacrifice that was never really fulfilled. Last year, there was a national feeling that involvement in politics and government was a way to make a difference. Whether it is the turn in the economy or how people have been turned on by

politics, we should grab the opportunity to get even more people involved.

In September of 2007, I wrote a cover story for TIME called “The Case for National Service.” In that story, we advocated a ten-point plan for universal national service that included a national-service baby bond, the creation of a Cabinet-level department of national service, the expansion of AmeriCorps, the creation of an Education Corps, a Green Corps and a Health Corps, and the creation of a National Service Academy. We hoped that someday the most common question young Americans would ask one another would be, “Where did you do your service?”

The cover sparked an enormous amount of attention both nationally and in the service world. A number of the ideas in the cover story have been incorporated into the Serve America Act, a comprehensive service bill that has been introduced by Senators Kennedy and Hatch. There are many innovative ideas in that bill, and we believe that legislation is necessary to make it easier for nonprofits to run national-service programs. Congress should focus on competition, quality, transparency and accountability for those organizations. We’ve continued to talk about national service, and our efforts have included sponsoring, along with Service Nation, a national-service summit last year during the presidential campaign in which candidates Obama and McCain discussed service for 90 minutes on national television. Our issue last year, “21 Ways to Fix Up America,” had pieces from Colin Powell, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Miley Cyrus, John Dilulio, John McCain and Barack Obama. This is a

subject I'm passionate about, and I've had great support from the business side of TIME. Time Inc. has been at the forefront of the corporate service movement, and Time Warner, our parent company, has a proud tradition of civic leadership. TIME, Time Inc. and Time Warner employees engage in civic work throughout America and the world. At TIME, we're committed to continuing this call for service, and we'll do another special issue this September. I believe the media can play an important role in stimulating civic engagement, and I welcome your ideas and suggestions on what we might feature this year.

America is at a critical moment right now where national service can help us solve many of our most acute national problems. At a time like this, service is not a luxury but an effort that can help us rebuild, restore confidence and prepare for the future. It was Ben Franklin who first said that as Americans, we can do well by doing good – that has never been truer than it is right now. Thank you.