

Securing the American Character

By Stanley McChrystal

Our country has always been driven by big ideas. We were founded on the principle that “all men are created equal” — a revolutionary concept in the 18th century. Social movements like the drive for civil rights propelled us closer to the ideals that our Founders espoused. The GI Bill empowered our returning veterans to lead the country as they came home from World War II. Each of these big ideas responded to crises of the time — taxation without representation; the hypocrisy of separate but equal; 16 million veterans demobilizing from war. Right now, we are facing a new crisis: Citizenship no longer demands a common experience — and so we no longer believe in a common future. The time has come for a dramatic and bold response that calls on every young American to serve.

Today, the need for a shared experience of citizenship is more poignant than ever. We are drifting apart. Traditional forms of civic participation have atrophied. Our politics lurch from one bitter breakdown to the next while massive issues that affect our national prosperity and security languish unaddressed. We are losing our concept of citizenship. The sense of responsibility and contribution that President John F. Kennedy trumpeted and the willingness to sacrifice for an idea that Abraham Lincoln immortalized in 272 words at Gettysburg feel like faint echoes from earlier, nobler times.

National service is the big idea for our time. All young Americans should have the opportunity and feel the responsibility to serve their country. We need to create a culture in which at least a year of service is culturally expected, if not quite mandatory by law.

What would the concept of a “service year” entail? A young person would perform a year of full-time service between the ages of 18 and 28 and receive a modest stipend. As with existing programs such as AmeriCorps, he or she would complete the service year at a host institution: a nonprofit, a university or other institution. The service could be done across a wide array of fields from education to conservation, and it could entail tasks like building homes, serving meals to the elderly or helping veterans transition back to civilian life. This would not be a big new government program. Rather, service years would be funded through public-private partnerships enabled by a national service technology platform that would connect young people who want to serve, organizations that can host them and funders. There wouldn’t be a single top-down program. Rather, everyone would be connected by the common experience of their service year.

A service year would go beyond helping to solve social problems. By creating a cultural expectation that every young person does a year of challenging, meaningful service to the nation — whose goals are big and where success means solving complex, dynamic problems — more young Americans are likely to have an experience that reinforces and instills values like grit and persistence. These are the very skills that have been found to predict career success and that employers are seeking. More important than the skills a service year would impart on those serving, and more urgent than the specific social problems that service years could help to solve, a system of national service is needed to mend what is an increasingly shorn society.