

Many similar ideas have been proposed before, but this idea is now more achievable than it's ever been. Despite dwindling social trust, young people are in fact more likely than their predecessors to try to serve in some way. A 2010 Pew survey found that 57 percent of millennials report having volunteered in the preceding six months. Thirty percent of millennials identify meaningful work as the single most important factor in a successful career, while 71 percent identify meaningful work as one of the top three most important factors. In addition, the demand for service dramatically exceeds the supply of existing service opportunities. AmeriCorps had more than 580,000 applications for just over 80,000 slots in 2011. In the same year, Teach for America had some 48,000 applications for just 5,200 slots. Unfortunately, there's no common pathway large enough to match such enthusiasm.

According to Pew, "relatively few millennials — just 2% of males — are military veterans. At a comparable stage of their life cycle, 6% of gen X-er men, 13% of baby boomer men and 24% of silent men were veterans."

It would be easy to look at those numbers and say that young people simply don't want to join the military or serve, but that's not the case. The military is smaller than it was and the requirements for military duty disqualify many people who would still like to serve. Rather than expanding the military simply to provide more service slots, the country should work to create a new civic institution — the service year — that's reflective of young people's enthusiasms and functions to give everyone a stake in the outcome of the country by giving them the opportunity to serve.

To endure in the long run, national service and the service year must be something that young people want to do. Conscription movements fail and become counterproductive when they become something that wealthier young people can avoid.

The underlying purpose of national service must be to mold better citizens and bind our young people to one another and to the nation. The only way we can transform these ideas into reality is if we get a broad swath of Americans to agree with the fundamental idea that "everyone should serve for a year."

Young people want to serve, and our country badly needs it. There's a chance — right now — to create a new rite of passage into adulthood and forge a renewed sense of citizenship. All young Americans should have the opportunity to serve.

*Retired general Stanley McChrystal is chair of the Leadership Council of the Aspen Institute's Franklin Project, which promotes national service among American youth. This piece is a shortened version of a longer article by General McChrystal in this month's issue of Democracy Journal.*

McChrystal, Stanley. "Securing the American Character." *Politico*. POLITICO LLC, 2 June 2014. Web.