



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on May 15, 2009

National Service: “Serving” Political Ends

Barack Obama employed some of this same rhetoric in his address to a joint session of Congress February 27, 2009, where he called for “a renewed spirit of national service for this and future generations” and for Congress to send him “bipartisan legislation” expanding national service:



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It is our responsibility as lawmakers and educators to make this system work. But it is the responsibility of every citizen to participate in it.... I know that the price of tuition is higher than ever, which is why if you are willing to volunteer in your neighborhood or give back to your community or serve your country, we will make sure that you can afford a higher education. And to encourage a renewed spirit of national service for this and future generations, I ask this Congress to send me the bipartisan legislation that bears the name of Senator Orrin Hatch as well as an American who has never stopped asking what he can do for his country — Senator Edward Kennedy. These education policies will open the doors of opportunity for our children. But it is up to us to ensure they walk through them.

In other words, Obama seeks a nation where “every one works for every one else” and he “can’t do without any one.” Government’s role is to “ensure” everyone serves the state. The title of the bill itself is an imperative, “The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act.” There’s to be nothing voluntary about national service. Of course, if those committing to national service are being paid back in the form of a college education (which can cost more than \$40,000 per year), then they can hardly be called “volunteers.”

Pandering to Politicians

The primary focus of the new national-service recruits is to be political service to the administration in power in Washington, even if the highly respected *Congressional Quarterly* reported March 27 that “the bill would prohibit those in national-service programs from using their service position to lobby,



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participate in boycotts or strikes, conduct voter registration drives, engage in partisan political activities, or provide abortion services or referrals, among other activities.” Four days later, *Congressional Quarterly* reported that the bill would create new programs that mirror Barack Obama’s political goals: “It would establish a clean energy corps, education corps, veterans’ corps, health futures corps and opportunity corps with a goal of boosting financial literacy.” So much for being non-political.

President Obama signed the “Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act” on April 21 with the following words: “That is, after all, the beauty of service. Anyone can do it. You don’t need to be a community organizer, or a Senator — or a Kennedy — or even a President to bring change to people’s lives.”

Of course, if anyone can do it, then you don’t need a multibillion-dollar federal program to “bring change to other people’s lives.” People can help their neighbors on their own, as they have always done. The bill authorizes what President Obama calls an “army of 250,000 Corps members” who would serve in paid positions of national service, more than triple the 75,000 now in AmeriCorps. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the bill would cost \$1.2 billion in 2010 and significantly more in each subsequent year. The law would, in the words of the *New York Times*, constitute the “largest expansion of government-sponsored service programs since President John F. Kennedy first called for the creation of a national community service corps in 1963.” The House of Representatives passed a version of the legislation on March 18 by a vote of 321-105 and the Senate approved it even more overwhelmingly by a 79-19 vote on March 27. The House later agreed to Senate amendments on March 31 by a vote of 275-149 (more than 40 Republicans switched from their vote less than two weeks earlier).

Despite the multibillion-dollar aspect of this costly program, Obama claimed in his signing speech, “We’re doing this because I’ve always believed that the answers to our challenges cannot come from government alone.” That’s not to say he believes in limited federal government — especially limited to those powers delegated and enumerated by the U.S. Constitution. In Obama-speak, government can’t do national service “alone,” as it can with most other things in this world:

Our government can help to rebuild our economy and lift up our schools and reform health care systems and make sure our soldiers and veterans have everything they need — but we need Americans willing to mentor our eager young children, or care for the sick, or ease the strains of deployment on our military families.... A week from tomorrow marks the 100th day of my administration. In those next eight days, I ask every American to make an enduring commitment to serving your community and your country in whatever way you can.

Again, “we can’t do without any one.” Government needs to be in the driver’s seat on national service, but Americans are free to choose their servitude to the “community.” Of course, that national service would be guided by the Obama administration’s financial incentives.

Obama called the bill “just the beginning of a sustained, collaborative and focused effort to involve our greatest resource — our citizens — in the work of remaking this nation.” And he intends to remake the nation in the image of his political agenda:

Programs like these are a force multiplier; they leverage small numbers of members into thousands of volunteers. And we will focus their service toward solving today’s most pressing challenges: clean energy, energy efficiency, health care, education, economic opportunity, veterans and military families.

Not coincidentally, these “challenges” mirror Obama’s political agenda. In other words, the national-service bill would help increase the “army” (Obama’s word) helping to bring Obama’s political goals to



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reality.

Bringing Everyone Into the Fold

National-service programs would also bring churches and traditional charitable organizations under the heel of government. Obama says: "This bill includes a new Social Innovation Fund that will bring nonprofits and foundations and faith-based organizations and the private sector to the table with government so that we can learn from one another's success stories. We'll invest in ideas that work, leverage private-sector dollars to encourage innovation, expand successful programs to scale and make them work in cities across America." Government would use its financial "leverage" to control private non-profits and keep them in line with Obama's political agenda. That's part of how Obama intends to begin "remaking this nation."

The political namesake for the legislation argues that without multibillion-dollar federal efforts, Americans won't be able to serve their communities. "This legislation will enable many more Americans to do something for their country to meet the many challenges facing us," Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) told the *New York Times*.

"Enables" Americans to do more for their country? Nothing's stopping anyone from serving in their community right now, without this law. But it's hardly surprising that Kennedy, a lifelong government employee, wouldn't consider doing community service unless it involved a salaried position in the government. President Barack Obama also sounded like Kennedy in his praise of the measure: "Because of this legislation, millions of Americans at all stages of their lives will have new opportunities to serve their country." By "serve their country," Obama means "servitude to government." If you serve others in your country without the imprimatur of government, it doesn't count.

This bill is not about volunteerism, as Congressman Ron Paul (R-Texas) explained on the House floor March 18:

Participation in the program is not voluntary for the taxpayers. Second, nothing in the bill prevents federal taxpayer dollars from being used to support state and local programs that force children to perform "community service" as a condition of graduating from high school. Because an increasing number of schools across the nation are forcing children to provide "service" as a condition of graduating, it is quite likely that the funds authorized by this bill will be used to support mandatory service.

The text of the bill makes numerous references to "local education agencies" as the key to fascist-style, public-private "partnerships," though of course it does not explain that such "partnerships" were the cornerstone of Benito Mussolini's economic fascism. If young people can be compelled to national-service commitments as a high-school graduation requirement, those who refuse such service would be essentially prohibited from entering college (because few colleges accept students without a high-school diploma). And those without college degrees generally enjoy less economic opportunity.

The message of the "national service" programs under Obama is essentially this: serve the state, or you will have no future.

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