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National Service. It's Time! - America, we have a problem.

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Underpinning much of what is wrong in our country and our politics today is the fact that we're churning out better consumers than we are citizens.

That's right, many of us know the price of everything and the value of very little, including the value of a functioning, effective, fair and accountable government, which leads to a functioning, effective, fair and accountable society.

A recent **Washington Post-University of Maryland** poll indicates that 70 percent of Americans say the nation's politics have reached a dangerous low. Moreover, 8-in-10 say Congress is dysfunctional and they have limited trust in other institutions, including the media.



This criticism of politics, government, and our institutions is a bit disingenuous given that a recent survey found that **75 percent of Americans cannot name the three branches of government?Executive, Legislative and Judicial?**let alone their separate functions and responsibilities vital to the health of our democracy.

Bottom line is: **We get the government we deserve.**

We don't all need to agree, but we do need to speak?and act?from a base of knowledge.

This is especially true when it comes to our country?s youth, who will determine the direction our nation takes.

When 6 million jobs go begging because our young people, in particular, do not have the skill sets to fill them? When these same young people, from the ages of 18-to-26, feel disenfranchised from society, do not trust the government and believe they are being left behind.

When we have done a better job educating this same young cohort to be better consumers than they are citizens, then we must face the fact that the United States is in the midst of a serious crisis.

National Service may be a viable answer.

National service in the United States has a long tradition, from the founding of America, and takes on multiple forms, among them community, international and military service.



If as a nation we are to succeed in the long run, our young people need to be educated and understand what it means to be an American. They must be made to feel that they, like previous generations, have a stake in the long-term well-being of our nation. They need to know that their lives and work are meaningful, and that their futures are bright.

What might a national service program look like?

Well for one thing, it might include recruitment into the **Corporation for National and Community Service organizations like Americorps, VISTA, Equal Justice Works, Teach for America and Children's Corps. Or the United States Armed Forces**, where upon completion of a two-year engagement young volunteers would be entitled to similar national benefits to which active military personnel are entitled.

Or it could mean a stint in the **Peace Corps**. Or a revival of the **New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps (the CCC)**. Or serving in organizations that focus on healthcare, cyber security, cultural anthropology, languages, journalism and more.

In return for their service in any corps area, participants would receive lodging, uniforms, healthcare and good allowances, as well as stipends -- and a well-grounded education in how government works in our country, with our diverse citizenry seeking common good.

Upon completion of two years of service they will be entitled to numerous government incentives, including an education debt reduction or education allowance similar to the **GI Bill** and other options to support the national service movement.

Fact is talent exists everywhere, from the poorest of inner city areas to the most remote rural communities in America.



What's often lacking, however, is opportunity.

A national service program like the one described above would serve as a catalyst for opportunities nationwide. It would give young people the chance to experience parts of America they've never been to before, to see and understand how other people live, work and play.

At the same, time they would be serving in numerous, critical work environments while getting skills and an education in what it means to be a valued service provider, what it means to have a stake in the communities they serve?and in their own lives. What it means to be an American!

In full disclosure, I am personally involved, along with many others, in trying to get a program such as this off the ground and into the halls of Congress, where we hope our representatives will act in a bipartisan manner to legislate?and fund?such an ambitious effort.

This is a bold effort that will require bold commitments to achieve bold outcomes. However, nothing less than the future of our democracy is at stake.

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