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## **Do Americans Owe Service to the Nation?**

**by Sheldon Richman**

Why does the idea of “national service” never cease to attract American intellectuals? Every few years some prominent “thinker” proposes that young Americans “serve their country” in either a civilian or military capacity. Such service is always promised to have a profound effect on both the nation and the people doing the serving.

The latest example comes from *Time* magazine managing editor Richard Stengel. In his September 10 cover article, “A Time to Serve,” Stengel laments a lack of involvement in civic life by Americans. Too many people do nothing more than vote and pay taxes, he says. Well of course they pay taxes. They are threatened with prison if they don’t.

Stengel is convinced that if the republic is to survive, young people must “serve.” He cites the Founders as authorities on the need to exert effort in order to “keep” the republic, but he is on somewhat weak ground here. There are Founders and then there are Founders. The Founders known as the Anti-Federalists thought that the way to keep a republic is to have 13 small ones joined in a confederation, not a big consolidated one. In a large nation people would have a hard time keeping an eye on the government, and the resulting lack of “eternal vigilance” would be dangerous to liberty. Thus it’s ironic for Stengel to be looking to Washington to lead the effort to preserve the republic.

But the historical point aside, why is it thought appropriate that people should be either forced or bribed to perform national service as defined by politicians? To his credit, Stengel doesn’t want to compel people to perform the tasks he deems “service.” How thoughtful. However, the taxpayers would be forced to finance his program, so it would not be fully voluntary.

Stengel is not merely urging people to do good deeds in an organized way, say, to join groups to teach poor kids to read or to clean up their communities. He is talking about service to the *Nation*.

But where do people get the idea that the Nation is something to be served? Despite Stengel’s invocation of the Founders, this is a profoundly un-American concept. It’s far more

consistent with the European despotism of the first half of the twentieth century. You don't have to look hard to find quotations by Mussolini (dare I mention Hitler?) about the duty of the individual to serve the Nation.

To call this idea un-American is no mere polemical device. It is a literal truth. Service to the Nation is a mystical notion. Its advocates reify the abstraction "nation" and call on us to sacrifice for it. This is not what most Americans thought at the time of the founding. In the classical liberal philosophy held by many people in the late eighteenth century (inspired by John Locke), "society," "nation," and "country" were concepts indicating people's living together to enjoy life, liberty, and property in collective security. These were important conveniences that permitted individual persons to live fully as human beings. They were means, not ends in themselves. The Nation was not something to serve. An idea like that can get you killed in a far-off imperial war.

This is far from what Stengel has in mind. He writes,

But at this moment in our history, 220 years after the Constitutional Convention, the way to get citizens involved in civic life, the way to create a common culture that will make a virtue of our diversity, the way to give us that more capacious sense of "we" — finally, the way to keep the Republic — is universal national service.... It is the simple but compelling idea that devoting a year or more to national service, whether military or civilian, should become a countrywide rite of passage, the common expectation and widespread experience of virtually every young American.

In the land of the free, the state should not be pushing people into service, creating a common culture, or giving them a sense of "we." That Stengel believes this is a proper function of the government shows how far removed he is from the philosophy the first Americans embraced.

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