

Restore the Republic

by Gary Hart

Last night President Obama awakened "a renewed spirit of national service." The American Republic must now respond.

Almost 2500 years ago, Pericles, in his ageless funeral oration, praised men who were worthy of the city and declared those "useless" who took no interest in the well-being of Athens. Many of my generation consider John Kennedy's call to "ask what you can do for your country" to have been the origin of the ideal of public service. Instead, the notion of dedication, participation, and service is as old as the Republic itself.

We consider ourselves a democracy, yet we salute the flag of a republic. No idea is more central to the concept of a republic than what used to be called civic virtue, but what today would be called "giving something back," or public service. Founders of republics throughout the ages, including our own, firmly believed that without the involvement of citizens in the common good of their communities and their country the republic would not long survive. The modern republican theorist, Quentin Skinner, has put it this way: "performance of our public duties is indispensable to the maintenance of our own liberty."

The ideal of service is particularly strong among young people, those who have yet to undertake the private duties of family, financial obligation, and wage earning. Thus, those who have sought to keep the ancient republican ideal alive in our own time have created and supported the Peace Corps, Vista, and more recently Americorps. And there are those like Alan Khazei and Michael Brown who have created organizations such as City Year to fill in the gaps when our government seems unconcerned with citizen engagement in the national interest.

Now, in a new time of national peril, rather than considering it a luxury, we need to see national service as a necessity for the rallying of the national community behind our common good and our common goals. No single step would revitalize our fearful national spirit more than a new era of civic republicanism. The single best vehicle to achieve this goal is the proposed Serve America Act sponsored by Senators Ted Kennedy and Orrin Hatch. This is a genuinely bipartisan response to President Obama's challenge to Americans of all ages to serve the national community.

Building on existing Americorps programs and the National Community Service Act, Serve America would substantially expand opportunities for all age groups, from young people to retired professionals, to provide a year or more of service in community education, health, environment, energy efficiency, and a host of other projects. Young people participating in Serve America would also qualify for financial support to pursue higher education.

Among those hardest hit by a shrinking job market are those just entering the work force. Rather than stay in their parents' home, roam the mean streets, or suffer endless employment rejection, unemployed young people especially can join Serve America to improve their communities and build their own

ladders out of economic recession. Creative opportunities such as this are exactly what Barack Obama's standard of "responsibility" is all about.

At a time when so many public needs, from schools to parks, from soup kitchens to retirement homes, are unmet, Serve America is not a "make work" project. It is targeted toward real needs not currently being met by private enterprise or any level of government. The costs of Serve America are minuscule in an age of massive bank bailouts, industrial rescues, and mortgage underwriting.

Resistance to expanded public service programs can be expected from the ideologically sclerotic, those who occupy the negative ground between government as the problem and government as our enemy. These are clearly people unfamiliar with Pericles or even for that matter Thomas Jefferson.

To be a true republican is to recognize the role of civic virtue, participation in the public affairs of the community, and to be among the men and women of whom future generations of Americans will say, they were worthy of their city and their nation.