

BUSH'S ADVENTURES IN THE NATIONAL SERVICE POLICY ARENA AND FIVE LESSONS FOR PRESIDENT OBAMA

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ABSTRACT

As candidates, both Barack Obama and John McCain criticized George W. Bush's failure to call for sacrifice and service from the American people in the wake of 9/11. However, criticizing the mistakes of a past president is not the same as learning from them. Obama has referred to service as the "cause of my presidency." If Obama is indeed committed to following through on this campaign rhetoric, what lessons can he learn from Bush's experiences? This essay offers an analysis of Bush's adventures in national service policy and, in particular, his failures of presidential leadership in this arena. Its purpose is to identify and elucidate five lessons derived from these experiences that will help President Obama better navigate this policy issue.

INTRODUCTION

On September 11, 2008, Senators John McCain and Barack Obama suspended their presidential campaigns for the evening to speak in support of national service at the Service Nation Presidential Candidates Forum at Columbia University. During back-to-back interviews with PBS anchor Judy Woodruff and *TIME Magazine* editor Richard Stengel, each candidate suggested that had he been president, he would have called for sacrifice from the American people in the wake of September 11, 2001. McCain referred to President George W. Bush's failure to emphasize the need for volunteerism and service during that period as "one of the biggest mistakes that we ever made after 9/11." Obama added: "I think that had the president very clearly said, this is not just going to be a war of a few of us, this is going to be an effort that mobilizes all of us, I think we would have had a different result."¹

As this essay illustrates, these criticisms of Bush's tardy response to the civic awakening that emerged following the events of 9/11 are justified. However, recognizing and criticizing

the mistakes of a past president is not the same as learning from them. President Obama has indicated that his call for Americans to serve will not be “issued in one speech or program; this will be a cause of my presidency.”² If Obama is indeed committed to following through on this campaign rhetoric, what lessons can he learn from the experiences of his predecessor?

The following is an analysis of Bush’s adventures in the realm of national service policy and, in particular, his failures of presidential leadership in this arena. Its purpose is to identify and elucidate five lessons derived from these experiences that will help President Obama better navigate this policy issue.³

LESSON #1: CRISES CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR BOLD PRESIDENTIAL POLICY-MAKING; YET, THEY ARE FLEETING AND DEMAND A TIMELY RESPONSE

Unforeseen events can serve as triggering devices that transform these events into pressing policy issues. John W. Kingdon conceptualizes the opportunities created by such triggering devices as policy windows, which open infrequently and only remain open for short periods of time.⁴ In Kingdon’s terms, the events of 9/11 established a favorable political environment for bold policy-making steps by President Bush. In his assessment of American civic engagement in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Robert D. Putnam agreed that a “window of opportunity has opened for a sort of civic renewal that occurs only once or twice a century.”⁵

¹ For a transcript of the McCain and Obama interviews at the Service Nation Presidential Candidates Forum, see http://www.bethechangeinc.org/service_nation/summit/transcription

² Barack Obama, “Speech in Mt. Vernon, IA,” December 5, 2007. http://www.barackobama.com/2007/12/05/obama_issues_call_to_serve_vow.php

³ While the term “national service” is a familiar part of the American political lexicon, there is little consensus as to its meaning. This lack of a shared understanding, according to Williamson M. Evers, has left the usage of this term “in a muddle.” See Williamson M. Evers, “Introduction: Social Problems and Political Ideals in the Debate Over National Service.” In *National Service: Pro & Con*, edited by W.M. Evers (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1990). For the purposes of this paper, national service is defined broadly as community service and volunteerism that is supported by government, whether financially, institutionally, or rhetorically.

⁴ John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1984).

⁵ Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Together: The United State of America,” *The American Prospect* 13, no.3 (February 2002): 22.

“An Outbreak of Civic-Mindedness”

The weeks after 9/11 were marked by a significant shift in civic attitudes among Americans.⁶ As one commentator remarked: “In the days that followed, we all witnessed an outbreak of civic-mindedness so extreme that it seemed American character had changed overnight.”⁷ Data suggest that a measurable change did take place during this period. According to one November 2001 poll, 81 percent of those surveyed “are looking for a way to contribute to the nation and support efforts by the federal government to facilitate such efforts” and 70 percent supported “dramatically enlarging America’s national service program.”⁸ Another found significant increases in levels of political consciousness and engagement compared to findings from the previous year. In particular, it identified a renewed trust in national government (+44 percent) and one’s neighbors (+10 percent), an increased interest in politics (+14 percent), and a heightened expectation of local cooperation during times of crisis (+6 percent).⁹

According to Democratic pollster Stanley B. Greenberg, the American people responded “with a strong emphasis on unity, coming together, community, seriousness of purpose, freedom of choice, and tolerance.”¹⁰ Charles C. Moskos interpreted the transformation as an “apparent awakening of a long-dormant patriotism.”¹¹ Noting this widespread change in attitudes, an opinion piece in the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed: “Something’s Happening Here.” However, its author did not overlook the fundamental question raised by this observation, subsequently asking: “Is America Going to Change Now?”¹²

Significantly, while polls identified a notable increase in civic trust and political interest among Americans in the weeks immediately following 9/11, there was no measurable movement in civic behavior. For example, comparing findings from 2000 with those documented in late 2001, there were no statistically significant differences in the willingness of Americans to join community groups (+0 percent) or attend public meetings (+1 percent).¹³ As Paul C. Light remarked: “At least on the surface, Americans appear ready to [undertake]

⁶ The notable increase in levels of civic activity that swept across the nation in reaction to the events of 9/11 was not unique. In fact, according to Theda Skocpol and her coauthors, “new bursts of civic engagement” have regularly accompanied periods of national crisis. See Theda Skocpol, Ziad Munson, Andrew Karch, and Bayliss Camp. “Patriotic Partnerships: Why Great Wars Nourished American Civic Voluntarism.” In *Shaped by War and Trade: International Influences on American Political Development*, edited by M. Shefter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

⁷ George Packer, “Recapturing the Flag,” *New York Times Magazine*, September 30, 2001.

⁸ Mark J. Penn, “Poll: How Americans Feel About Politics After 9/11,” Democratic Leadership Council, December 13, 2001. http://www.ndol.org/ndol_ci.cfm?contentid=250017&subid=269&kaid=127

⁹ Thomas H. Sander and Robert D. Putnam, “Walking the Civic Talk After Sept. 11,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 19, 2002.

¹⁰ Stanley B. Greenberg, “‘We’—Not ‘Me’: Public Opinion and the Return of Government,” *The American Prospect* 12, no.22 (2001): 25.

¹¹ Charles C. Moskos, “Patriotism-Lite Meets the Citizen-Soldier.” In *United We Serve: National Service and the Future of Citizenship*, edited by E.J. Dionne, K.M. Drogosz and R.E. Litan (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), p.33.

¹² John Balzar, “Something’s Happening Here: Is America Going to Change Now?” *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 2001.

¹³ Sander and Putnam, 2002.

acts of goodness and kindness. Unfortunately, little of this civic enthusiasm has spilled over into volunteering.”¹⁴

As explained by civic engagement scholars Putnam and Theda Skocpol, a change in public attitudes, while necessary, is not a sufficient condition for genuine civic revitalization.¹⁵ They agree that it must be accompanied by a change in behavior to have any sort of long-term social effect. Yet, they argue that a large-scale transformation of civic attitudes into civic behavior will not occur spontaneously among American society; government commitment and action — in the form of popular leadership, resources, and the provision of meaningful service opportunities — is a necessity. Moreover, to be effective, the government reaction needs to be timely. In late 2001, Putnam and Skocpol warned that without the widespread and timely translation of attitudes into behavior, any civic goods generated in response to the events of 9/11 would be fleeting.

Bush Fails to React

In the immediate weeks following 9/11, however, President Bush and his aides were silent on the issues of civic engagement and national service. Concerning this silence from the White House, David Gergen, former advisor to Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton, remarked that “President Bush clearly supports the idea. What is lacking, though, is a clarion call, a ‘certain trumpet’ that breaks through, along with a sweeping plan for action.”¹⁶ Incredulous and frustrated by what they perceived as Bush’s lack of leadership, many civic engagement advocates implored the president to tap into the palpable, collective outpouring of civic emotion by calling for shared sacrifice and channeling this popular energy toward the achievement of common goals. The growing calls for the

¹⁴ Paul C. Light, “Volunteers,” National Public Radio, February 7, 2002. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1137657>

¹⁵ See Robert D. Putnam, “A Better Society in a Time of War,” *New York Times*, October 19, 2001; “Bowling Together: The United State of America,” *The American Prospect* 13, no.3 (February 2002): 22; Theda Skocpol, “Will 9/11 and the War on Terror Revitalize American Civic Democracy?” *PS: Political Science and Politics* XXXV, no.3 (2002): 537-540; “Will September 11 Revitalize Civic Democracy?” In *United We Serve: National Service and the Future of Citizenship*, edited by E.J. Dionne, K.M. Drogosz and R.E. Litan (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

At its most basic level, the concept of civic engagement implies the active participation of citizens in civic life. According to Michael Walzer, this notion is based on the normative claim that the preferred setting and most supportive environment for the “good life” is within an organized political community in which we are “politically active, working with our fellow citizens, collectively determining our common destiny.” See Michael Walzer, “The Idea of Civil Society: A Path to Social Reconstruction.” In *Community Works: The Revival of Civil Society in America*, edited by E.J. Dionne (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), p.125.

¹⁶ David Gergen, “A Time to Heed the Call,” *U.S. News & World Report*, December 12, 2001.

White House to take action were summed up in an October 16 headline in the *Christian Science Monitor*: “Public Feels the Urge to Act — But How?”¹⁷

The frustration of civic engagement advocates generated by Bush's silence was exacerbated when he passed on opportunities to take up the issue in response to questions from the White House press corps. For instance, during a press conference four days after the attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., Bush was asked about the sacrifices that ordinary Americans would now be expected to make in their daily lives. He responded: “Our hope, of course, is that they make no sacrifice whatsoever. We would like to see life return to normal in America.”¹⁸ Yet, for civic engagement advocates, the return to pre-9/11 normalcy meant a return to a society in civic decline and, more tragically, an historic opportunity for civic renewal squandered. As 2001 came to an end without a clear, civically-oriented policy response by the Bush Administration, there was a growing concern that the historic “window of opportunity” was quickly closing.

According to Obama, “President Bush squandered an opportunity to mobilize the American people following 9/11 by not asking them to serve.”¹⁹ In his principle policy speech on the national service issue, delivered as a Democratic primary candidate in Mt. Vernon, IA, on December 5, 2007, Obama argued: “We had a chance to step into the currents of history. We were ready to answer a new call for our country. But the call never came.”²⁰ In fact, Bush did ultimately issue a “call to service” in his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002; four and a half months after the terrorist attacks. The problem was not a lack of interest or commitment on Bush's part, but one of timely presidential leadership.

LESSON #2: DESPITE A VAST WHITE HOUSE STAFF, A SINGLE POLICY ENTREPRENEUR WITH THE RIGHT IDEAS, CHARACTER, AND COMMITMENT IS INDISPENSABLE

The “call to service” issued by President Bush in his 2002 State of the Union address asked Americans to pledge two years of their lives to the service of others and introduced the USA Freedom Corps, which sought to reorganize and refocus the federal government's service apparatus. However, he had made the key decision that led to the development of this proposal much earlier. It was not an answer to the question of what the national service policy response should look like or how it would seek to translate the widespread shift in civic attitudes into a significant change in civic behavior. Instead, it addressed the question of “Who?” Bush's answer was John M. Bridgeland.

¹⁷ Abraham McLaughlin, “Public Feels Urge to Act—But How?” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 16, 2001.

¹⁸ George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President,” Camp David, September 15, 2001. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010915-4.html>

¹⁹ See “Barack Obama and Joe Biden's Plan for Universal Voluntary Public Service,” Obama-Biden For President campaign website. <http://www.barackobama.com/pdf/NationalServicePlanFactSheet.pdf>

The Policy Entrepreneur Extraordinaire

According to interviews with White House staff members, political appointees, and leaders in the nonprofit sector²¹, Bridgeland (“Bridge” to those who know him) was almost singularly responsible for developing the president’s national service policy response to the events of 9/11. According to the former Director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, John J. DiIulio, Jr.:

[The administration said,] “OK, what can we do constructively? Bridge, figure it out. Bridge, give us a plan. Bridge, be the guy.” And it’s really Bridgeland’s ideas that, as far as I can tell, set the framework. This one guy, Bridgeland, *is* the story. They had a problem in search of a solution and he was the solution.²²

Bridgeland was the rare breed of Beltway insider whose sincere civic-mindedness contributed to the image that he was somehow above politics. Although not a publicly-recognized figure, Bridgeland was widely recognized in halls of government as “a very respected person who had the president’s ear and who was a very forceful advocate who could talk to both sides” of the aisle.²³

A graduate of Harvard University and the University of Virginia Law School, Bridgeland entered into government service in 1993 as chief-of-staff for then-Representative Rob Portman, later Bush’s Director of the White House Office of Management and Budget. Bridgeland joined the Bush presidential campaign in 2000 as Deputy Domestic Policy Director, provided legal advice during the ballot counting fiasco in Florida, and co-directed the policy transition team with Joshua Bolton, who later served as White House chief-of-staff. When Bush took office, Bridgeland was named Deputy Assistant to the President and head of the Domestic Policy Council, quickly establishing himself as a “go-to” guy in the administration.

And when it came to designing a national service policy response to 9/11, Bush once again called upon Bridgeland. In an interview, Bridgeland recalled: “I was in the Oval Office with the president. He looked at me and said ‘Bridge, I want you to develop an initiative,’ and

²⁰ Obama, December 5, 2007.

²¹ Among those interviewed for this research project were Bill Bentley, former Executive Vice President and Chief Operations Officer of the Points of Light Foundation; John Bridgeland, former Director of the White House Office of the USA Freedom Corps and Assistant to the President; Elizabeth DiGregorio, Director of Citizen Corps in the Office of Disaster Preparedness at the Department of Homeland Security; Dr. John J. DiIulio, Jr., Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, former Director of the White House Office for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and Assistant to the President; Jane Eisner, columnist for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*; Henry Lozano, former Director of the White House Office of the USA Freedom Corps and Deputy Assistant to the President; Marc Magee, Director of the Center for Civic Enterprise at the Democratic Leadership Council-Progressive Policy Institute; Dr. Robert Putnam, Professor at Harvard University and former “consultant” for the USA Freedom Corps; Patricia Read, Senior Vice President for Public Policy and Government Affairs at Independent Sector; and Jim Towey, former Director of the White House Office for Faith Based and Community Initiatives and Deputy Assistant to the President.

²² John J. DiIulio, Jr., Interview by Richard Holtzman, Philadelphia, PA, May 20, 2004.

these were the words he used, 'to create a culture of service, citizenship, and responsibility.'"²⁴ Along with his assignments to design, develop, and later direct Bush's citizen service initiative as the new "Service Czar," Bridgeland was promoted to the rank of Assistant to the President, which granted him direct access to the Oval Office.

"...And Then He Came Up with A Plan"

After presidential approval, it was left to Bridgeland to fill in the details. As a consequence of this model of policy-making, the particulars of this initiative were determined by a surprisingly limited array of factors. The most influential factor, according to interviews with those involved in the process, was Bridgeland himself. Again, DiIulio:

The [answer to the] question: "Why not other options or models?" is that nobody asked [for anything specific]. I mean they gave it to one guy and didn't give him much staff and didn't give him any other real support and said "Do what you can" and then he came up with a plan. I know it's an overly simple, overly parsimonious explanation; but what you're looking at when you're looking at the components of Freedom Corps are things that he believed in, was able to get some support for, and was able to do. There wasn't anybody else and there hasn't been anybody else focused on Freedom Corps.²⁵

Bridgeland relied upon his own resources by personally calling upon an eclectic group of "consultants" who broke the conservative mold. These consultants included Sargent Shriver, former head of John F. Kennedy's Peace Corps and Lyndon B. Johnson's Office of Economic Opportunity, which oversaw the VISTA program; Harris Wofford, a former Democratic Senator from Pennsylvania who assisted in the formation of the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps, and was the original CEO of Clinton's Corporation for National Service; and Robert Putnam, the prominent scholar of American civic engagement at Harvard University. Bridgeland also took advantage of his close relationship with DiIulio, a self-defined born-again Catholic Democrat, who had resigned as Director of the White House Faith-Based Office in August 2001 and returned to his professorship at the University of Pennsylvania.

As a candidate, Obama employed a similar approach. According to Steven Waldman, a self-described "service junkie" who serves as the editor-in chief of *Beliefnet.com* and has authored a book on the creation of Clinton's AmeriCorps program, Obama surrounded himself with the "best service advisors in the country."²⁶ These included Wofford, Alan Khazei, the founder of City Year and Be the Change, Vanessa Kirsch, the founder of Public Allies and New Profit, Inc., and DiIulio. However, beyond a team of advisors, the experiences of the Bush Administration indicate the benefit of having, in Kingdon's terms, a policy

²³ Jane Eisner. Interview by Richard Holtzman, Philadelphia, PA, May 20, 2004.

²⁴ John M. Bridgeland, Interview by Richard Holtzman, Washington, D.C., May 19, 2004.

²⁵ DiIulio, May 20, 2004.

²⁶ Steven Waldman, "A Junkie's Take on Obama's National Service Plan," *Beliefnet.com*, July 7, 2008.

<http://blog.beliefnet.com/stevenwaldman/2008/07/a-junkies-take-on-obamas-natio.html>

entrepreneur like Bridgeland who invests his time, energy, and reputation in managing every facet of the service issue and keeping it on the president's agenda.²⁷ Whether Obama will be able to find such an individual is an open question.

LESSON #3: UNDERLYING THE NATIONAL SERVICE ISSUE ARE IDEOLOGICAL BATTLE LINES CONCERNING THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT THAT CANNOT BE IGNORED

While Bush's "call to service" and introduction of the USA Freedom Corps was prominently featured as one of the four main pillars of his 2002 State of the Union address alongside the global struggle against terror, homeland security, and the need for tax cuts and job creation, the speech offered no clear explanation of what exactly this citizen service initiative would look like. Policy specifics that were left publicly unaccounted for included the structure and organization of the USA Freedom Corps, the nature of its relationship with the nonprofit volunteer and community service sector, the means by which it would pursue its mission to "promote a culture of responsibility, service, and citizenship"²⁸ and just what this mission meant in practical terms.

A New Citizen Service Initiative

Prior to its introduction, public discussions had focused almost exclusively on the possibility of responding to 9/11 with a massive expansion of Clinton's AmeriCorps program.²⁹ However, what was presented to the American people in the president's address was not a proposal to "take AmeriCorps to scale" through a substantial increase in federal appropriations that would increase its number of corps members from less than 50,000 to 250,000 or more. Nor did it involve the development of a new program based on the traditional national service model that underlies the Peace Corps, VISTA, and AmeriCorps. It

²⁷ Kingdon, 1984.

²⁸ "USA Freedom Corps Policy Book," The White House, January 30, 2002, p.3. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/freedom-corps-policy-book.pdf>

²⁹ See David Broder, "A Service To the Country," *The Washington Post*, October 7, 2001; Edward Epstein, "New Push for National Service: Sept. 11 Revives Interest in Citizenship Duty for Youth," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 6, 2002; Gergen, December 12, 2001; Richard Just, "Suddenly Serviceable: Is This the Moment for National Service?" *American Prospect* 13, no.1 (January 2002); Nancy Korman, "A Call for Heroes," *Boston Globe*, October 19, 2001; Putnam, October 19, 2001.

was instead something qualitatively new, referred to in Bush Administration policy papers as an “integrated citizen service initiative.”³⁰

The USA Freedom Corps represents an organizational umbrella under which the aforementioned national service programs, as well as pre-existing, service-oriented offices housed in a range of federal departments and agencies, were incorporated. Its primary mission is administrative; namely, to coordinate these programs and integrate them with the efforts of the nonprofit volunteer and community service sector. According to Bridgeland, the phenomenon of citizen service should be considered an enterprise of wide-ranging scope, which not only moves beyond the more limited concepts of national service, volunteerism, and community service, but incorporates them. Bridgeland's model is focused on establishing and sustaining lasting partnerships between governmental and social institutions by supporting and, ultimately, culturally embedding an ethic of service among all levels of the state and civil society.

The initiative's innovative nature comes into sharp relief when placed in the context of long-standing ideological debates, situated at the heart of the service issue, concerning the desired relationship between the government and civil society. Past efforts by presidents to promote and facilitate service can be divided into two distinct paradigms, around which two deeply entrenched camps have formed. The first is a government-funded national service model, which provides the structural framework for Kennedy's Peace Corps, Johnson's VISTA program, and Clinton's AmeriCorps. According to the principles of this model, it is the responsibility of government to provide meaningful opportunities for citizens to become civically engaged; a responsibility that is satisfied by the creation of an organized service corps. In exchange for a one- or two-year, full-time commitment, corps members receive federally-funded stipends and are guaranteed incentives, such as grants for higher education. These programs are wholly dependent on appropriations by Congress and, as a result, have historically provided a relatively small number of funded slots for potential corps members. They also have frequently become fodder in partisan battles over federal spending. As a result, expanding service opportunities by increasing the number of available slots has proven to be a difficult task.

The other paradigm is orientated toward what might be called the traditional volunteerism model. This model is grounded in the Tocquevillian image of America as a nation of joiners who, through organized associations and self-sacrifice, can address community problems without the assistance or imposition of government.³¹ These classic notions of limited government and responsible citizenship were at the heart of George H. W. Bush's Thousand Points of Light initiative, as well as the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan, who began the 1980s by invoking the American spirit of service “that flows like a deep and mighty river through the history of our nation.”³² This approach advocates community service, but eschews the creation of federal programs and appropriation of federal funds to support these efforts. The support offered is instead wholly rhetorical — calling on Americans to become engaged in their communities and praising those who do through public recognition. Underlying this

³⁰ “USA Freedom Corps Policy Book,” p.3.

³¹ See Richard Holtzman, “Voluntarism and Volunteering.” In *Social Issues in America: An Encyclopedia*, Vol.7, edited by J. Ciment (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2006).

model is the notion that expanding the reach of the federal government to coordinate and fund service activities is not only wasteful but counterproductive. Advocates of this paradigm consider the concept of paid volunteers as simply “an oxymoron.”³³

A “Third Way” for National Service Policy

According to Bridgeland: “USA Freedom Corps was an improvement from previous national service initiatives in that it bridged the divide between these two very, quite frankly, hostile and divisive camps.”³⁴ It did so by providing support in the form of federal appropriations for structured service opportunities as well as through the rhetorical promotion and recognition of traditional volunteerism. Bill Bentley, former Executive Vice President of the Points of Light Foundation, agreed in an interview that this balance is essential:

[W]e’ve got to integrate this because at the end of the day, traditional volunteers will always be here, always; and the government will never ever, ever put enough money into stipended service to meet the needs of local communities. So it’s got to be a marriage.³⁵

Through the incorporation of Citizen Corps, the Peace Corps, and the Corporation for National and Community Service under the umbrella of the USA Freedom Corps, Bridgeland was able to satisfy the dictates of compassionate conservatism by consolidating control over the government’s faith-based, community-, and service-oriented agencies and offices, systematize and institutionalize a supportive relationship between these governmental entities and the mediating structures of civil society, and do so with a minimal expenditure of federal funds. While conceptually innovative, however, Bridgeland’s model could not make up for the president’s failure to take advantage of the temporary spike in civic interest after 9/11.

Obama’s proposals do not seek to strike the same balance between the service paradigms that was sought by Bridgeland. Instead, his plans fall squarely in the tradition of the government-financed programs established by past Democratic presidents. These include expanding AmeriCorps to 250,000 slots from its current level at 75,000, more than doubling the size of Peace Corps to 16,000 volunteers from its current 7,800, and establishing new programs such as America’s Voice Initiative to recruit and train foreign language speakers to strengthen public diplomacy abroad and the Green Job Corps to assist youth in gaining experience in energy-focused career fields. According to the Obama campaign, these and other service programs are projected to have a total cost of \$3.5 billion per year.³⁶

³² Quoted in Harris Wofford, “The Politics of Service.” In *United We Serve: National Service and the Future of Citizenship*, edited by R.E. Litan (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), p.43.

³³ Bill Bentley, Interview by Richard Holtzman, Washington, D.C., February 17, 2004.

³⁴ Bridgeland, May 19, 2004.

³⁵ Bentley, February 17, 2004.

³⁶ For details on Obama’s proposed programs and yearly cost estimate, see the Obama-Biden National Service Plan Fact Sheet at <http://www.barackobama.com/pdf/NationalServicePlanFactSheet.pdf>

LESSON #4: BUSH'S CITIZEN CORPS HAS THE POTENTIAL TO SIGNIFICANTLY IMPACT THE PUBLIC CAPACITY FOR DISASTER RESPONSIVENESS IN THE U.S.

President Bush established the White House Office of the USA Freedom Corps, housed within the Executive Offices of the President (EOP), by Executive Order on January 30, 2002. This order's most concrete contribution was the creation of Citizen Corps, which Bush introduced in his 2002 State of the Union address as a means to "harness the power of every individual through education, training, and volunteer service to make communities safer, stronger, and better prepared to respond to the threats of terrorism, crime, public health issues, and disasters of all kinds."³⁷

Citizen Participation, Beyond the War on Terror

The idea for Citizen Corps emerged from the Presidential Task Force on Citizen Preparedness in the War Against Terrorism in November 2001. While Bridgeland, who served as the Task Force co-chair, understood that most positions in the developing homeland security apparatus would be filled by trained professionals, he recognized the need to identify meaningful opportunities for citizen participation as well. He argued that these service opportunities should not be primarily focused on protecting the nation's security, but rather on strengthening local communities. The reason, he explained when interviewed, is that "if people get bored and if there's no threat, which in most communities there won't be, it's not going to be sustained." Therefore, the goal was to encourage service opportunities that address "on-going community needs...but also will give a surge capacity in the case of an attack."³⁸

With the help of Elizabeth DiGregorio, then chief-of-staff at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and later Director of Citizen Corps, Bridgeland again developed a model that drew upon the support of local neighborhoods, churches, and voluntary associations rather than turning to direct intervention by the federal government. The mission of Citizen Corps is not to provide citizens with service opportunities, but to coordinate these opportunities through a loose framework offering organizational assistance to a national network of autonomous, locally-established Citizen Corps Councils, each responsible for developing strategies to meet the particular needs of their communities. According to "Citizen Corps: A Guide for Local Officials," these strategies include designing

³⁷ George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," Washington, D.C., January 29, 2002. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>

³⁸ Bridgeland, May 19, 2004.

community action plans, assessing potential threats, and identifying available resources to prepare for and respond to terrorist attacks and natural disasters.³⁹

These local Citizen Corps Councils have grown in strength and effectiveness by partnering with existing programs and professional first responders within their communities. Among these partners are Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS), enhancing the capacity of law enforcement by performing administrative duties to free up first responders during crisis situations; Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT), providing disaster preparedness education and training in basic disaster response skills; the Fire Corps, augmenting the capabilities of resource-constrained fire departments; Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) units, aiding local medical personnel in emergency response programs, public health initiatives, immunization programs, and blood drives; and Neighborhood Watch, administered by the National Sheriffs' Association, bringing residents together and providing public education to address its crime prevention mission, as well as emergency preparedness and response needs.

The day-to-day operations of Citizen Corps were first managed by FEMA, but were transferred to the Office of Disaster Preparedness within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) when the latter was established by Congress in November 2002. Soon after, Citizen Corps published "An In-Depth Guide for Citizen Preparedness" in partnership with FEMA and the DHS "Are You Ready?" public awareness campaign. This comprehensive guide aids families, workplaces, and community organizations in developing local emergency plans and supply kits, provides in-depth information on specific hazards, and outlines other necessary information and skills for disaster preparedness. Additionally, the CitizenCorps.gov website serves as an on-line clearinghouse providing descriptions and contact information for dozens of volunteer opportunities in communities across the country.

Up to Speed After a Slow Start

During its first year of existence, President Bush regularly promoted Citizen Corps in public appearances and speeches. However, the program's efforts to engage citizens locally were hindered by two early difficulties. First, Congress only approved \$74 million of the president's \$230 million budget request for the 2003 fiscal year. As a result, the new program was unable to effectively coordinate the swelling number of interested volunteers. Additionally, public perceptions of Citizen Corps were stained by controversy surrounding one of its proposed components, Operation TIPS (Terrorism Information and Prevention System). This ten-city pilot program was an \$8 million national reporting system that involved certain sectors of the American workforce in the homeland security effort. Truckers, postal workers, train conductors, ship captains, utility employees, flight attendants, and others were asked to act as the eyes and ears of law enforcement by reporting suspicious activities through a direct telephone hotline to the Justice Department. In 2002, House Majority Leader Dick Armey, with support from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), went on the

39 "Citizen Corps: A Guide for Local Officials," Citizen Corps, Department of Homeland Security. <http://www.citizencorps.gov/pdf/council.pdf>

offensive against TIPS, arguing that it encouraged “Americans to spy on one another.”⁴⁰ This public criticism was followed by a wave of negative attention on editorial pages across the nation, prompting the Bush Administration to abandon the program.

The reach of Citizen Corps, however, continues to expand. As of 2008, more than 2,300 local Citizen Corps Councils have been created through the initiative of citizens in every state.⁴¹ While this success falls far short of establishing the “culture of service” that Bush rhetorically promoted, it does suggest that this piece of Bridgeland’s model may offer a foundation upon which the Obama Administration could build. According to his campaign website, Obama’s proposal to expand AmeriCorps to 250,000 slots involves a plan to develop five new corps under its purview: “a Classroom Corps to help teachers and students, with a priority placed on underserved schools; a Health Corps to improve public health outreach; a Clean Energy Corps to conduct weatherization and renewable energy projects; a Veterans Corps to assist veterans at hospitals, nursing homes and homeless shelters; and a Homeland Security Corps to help communities plan, prepare for and respond to emergencies.”⁴² Akin to Citizen Corps, Obama’s Homeland Security Corps would work in concert with FEMA, yet it would involve the funding of full-time members to assist local community volunteers. Obama has not indicated his intentions regarding the Bush program that he has inherited.

LESSON #5: PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP INVOLVES MORE THAN RHETORICAL SUPPORT FOR NATIONAL SERVICE; IT DEMANDS ENGAGEMENT WITH CONGRESS

In his 2002 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush pledged that the “USA Freedom Corps will expand and improve the good efforts of AmeriCorps and Senior Corps to recruit more than 200,000 new volunteers.”⁴³ Less than a year later the AmeriCorps program was nearly dead. In December 2002, Congress drastically slashed its budget for the 2003 fiscal year and, as a result, its recruitment of future corps members was halted. Advocates for civic engagement, outraged by the prospect that opportunities to serve in governmental national service programs would plummet well below pre-9/11 numbers, implored the president to save the embattled program. Yet, the president remained silent on the matter, even while he continued “going public” to promote his “call to service” and use the reminder of 9/11 to actively encourage Americans to get involved. Bush offered no words in support of AmeriCorps, nor did he personally undertake any behind-the-scenes efforts to persuade members of his own party on Capitol Hill to come to its defense.

40 Quoted in Nat Hentoff, “The Death of Operation TIPS,” *The Village Voice*, December 17, 2002. <http://www.villagevoice.com/2002-12-17/news/the-death-of-operation-tips/>

41 “Citizen Corps Councils Around the Country,” Citizen Corps, Department of Homeland Security. <http://www.citizencorps.gov/cc/CouncilMapIndex.do>

42 “Barack Obama and Joe Biden’s Plan for Universal Voluntary Public Service.”

43 Bush, January 29, 2002.

The reason was that while Bush was spending a substantial amount of his time in 2002 talking to the American people about his “call to service” and USA Freedom Corps,⁴⁴ little communication took place between the White House and Congress. In particular, it was the unwillingness of the White House to spend the political capital necessary to engage Republican leaders in the House of Representatives, specifically then-Majority Leader Arney and then-Majority Whip Tom DeLay, which ultimately caused the most damage to Bush’s service initiative. On two occasions — during the quiet demise of the *Citizen Service Act*, the legislative centerpiece of the USA Freedom Corps, in 2002, and the AmeriCorps funding crisis in 2003 — the president opted to remain silently on the sidelines while long-time congressional opponents of government-run service initiatives challenged the president to back up his rhetoric with action.

Failure of the Citizen Service Act

On April 9, 2002, President Bush introduced his principles for the reauthorization of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), which served as the blueprint for the *Citizen Service Act* [H.R. 4854]. In an effort to meet the increased public demand that had arisen in response to 9/11, the primary intent of the bill was to overhaul and expand opportunities for service through accountability reforms and a dramatic increase in funding for CNCS. On May 24, 2002, the *Citizen Service Act* was taken up by the House Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Select Education, chaired by Representative Peter Hoekstra, who was also one of the bill’s authors and primary sponsors. While formerly a staunch opponent of AmeriCorps during the Clinton Administration, Hoekstra cited his support for the new accountability provisions included in the bill and predicted that it would pass through the House “relatively quickly and on a bipartisan basis.”⁴⁵

Despite Hoekstra’s optimism, Bridgeland recognized that the strongest opposition to the *Citizen Service Act* would come from members of his own party in the House. Representing the views of many House Republicans who were unwilling to publicly criticize the Bush Administration on an issue that the president had rhetorically linked to 9/11, one unidentified member said: “The federal government getting more involved in Bill Clinton’s program of national service is the silliest idea I have ever heard of.”⁴⁶ Not only was the House Republican leadership adamantly opposed to the notion of “paid volunteers,” but Clinton’s AmeriCorps was, according to DiIulio, “the thing they love most to hate. They can’t stand the very word — they call it AmeriCorpse.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ In his interview, Bridgeland noted that Bush made 26 public appearances in support of his “call to service” and USA Freedom Corps between their introduction on January 29, 2002, and the end of the year.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Sara Hebel, “Onetime Critics of AmeriCorps Praise President’s Plan to Expand It,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 12, 2002.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Kate O’Beirne, “Corps-Crazy: The Administration and its New, Needless Initiatives,” *National Review*, February 25, 2002.

⁴⁷ DiIulio, May 20, 2004.

Bridgeland knew that persuading the House Republican leadership to not only embrace but agree to fund the significant expansion of the Clinton program that they had long targeted would be a difficult if not impossible task. His concerns were justified. On June 12, 2002, the *Citizen Service Act* successfully made it out of committee. But with no comment or explanation by the agenda-setters in the House, it disappeared into legislative limbo, never to be brought to the floor for debate or vote. In response, the White House made a strategic decision to abandon negotiations with Congress and accomplish as much as possible through presidential executive order.

Once committed to the rhetorical policy initiated by Bush's "call to service" and sealed with the decision to abandon the *Citizen Service Act* on Capitol Hill, Bridgeland understood that nothing less than a full-time, well-mounted publicity campaign for the USA Freedom Corps would be needed to grow the number of Americans who chose to commit themselves to service. Yet, despite a \$23 million publicity campaign by the Ad Council and a constant stream of opinion pieces, speaking engagements, and radio show appearances by Bridgeland, most Americans did not appear to understand the structure and purpose of the USA Freedom Corps, or even be aware of its existence. This was most evident by the negligible changes in civic behavior that marked the years following its introduction.

Between September 2001 and September 2002, 59.8 million Americans over the age of sixteen volunteered. During the following twelve months, this number increased to 63.8 million. Accounting for the increase in population during this period, these figures indicate that the volunteer rate among those over sixteen years of age rose from 27.4 to 28.8 percent.⁴⁸ Between September 2003 and September 2004, the number of volunteers increased slightly to 64.5 million, which held the volunteer rate steady at 28.8 percent.⁴⁹ A White House press release on the three-year anniversary of the USA Freedom Corps in January 2005 boldly proclaimed: "Americans are answering the President's Call to Service."⁵⁰ However, the number of Americans answering the call had reached a plateau long before and already had begun to fall.⁵¹

The AmeriCorps Funding Crisis

Efforts to engage the public in national service after 9/11 were further hindered when the House of Representatives drastically slashed the budget of AmeriCorps in December 2002, which left Bridgeland's office consumed with securing its future financial viability. As DiIulio remarked: "Unfortunately, the defining event of what [the USA Freedom Corps]

48 "Increase in Volunteering," Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, December 19, 2003. <http://www.bls.gov/opub/td/2003/dec/wk3/art05.htm>

49 "Volunteer Rates in 2004," Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, December 17, 2004. <http://www.bls.gov/opub/td/2004/dec/wk2/art05.htm>

50 "Fact Sheet – USA Freedom Corps Marks Three-Year Anniversary," The White House Office of the USA Freedom Corps, January 29, 2005. http://www.usafreedomcorps.gov/about_usafc/newsroom/announcements_dynamic.asp?ID=856

51 "Volunteering in the United States, 2006," Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, January 10, 2007. <http://www.impactgiveback.org/PDF/VolunteeringUnitedStates2006.pdf>

could be becomes the battle over AmeriCorps.”⁵² And it was a battle in which Bridgeland could do no other than take the leading role. According to interviews, the effort to destroy AmeriCorps had been in the making for years, as conservative critics had long riddled it with charges of wastefulness, liberal advocacy, and over-blown claims of success without accompanying evidence.

As a result, Bridgeland was forced to turn his time and attention to saving AmeriCorps, rather than expanding the scope and impact of the USA Freedom Corps. He explained:

Everyone will tell you that I was wildly aggressive very early...pushing this thing because it was the right thing to do. And Congress wasn't willing to fix it; they wanted there to be pain. They wanted there to be a lot of pain. They've been waiting for there to be a lot of pain in the AmeriCorps program since it was passed. And this was a golden opportunity.⁵³

Editorials and columns in major dailies across the country called on Bush to match his rhetoric on service with action by putting pressure on the Republican leadership in the House; particularly, then-Majority Leader DeLay. Open letters signed by a bipartisan majority of state governors and a bipartisan majority of Senators asked the president to publicly come to the defense of the very same program that he had, only a year prior, promised to expand. However, despite the president's continuing rhetorical promotion of service to the American people, he neither turned up the heat on DeLay nor offered a public statement in support of the embattled AmeriCorps program.

As a result of the budget cut, the program was forced to cap its enrollment at 50,000 and was left without the financial resources it needed to recruit new corps members. Consequently, it turned away thousands of interested applicants during a four month “enrollment pause” between November 15, 2002 and March 11, 2003. In the midst of this pause, in January 2003, Bush declared that the year which had passed since the introduction of the USA Freedom Corps had seen a great expansion in national service opportunities as a result of his administration's program. However, rather than the 75,000 corps members projected to serve in 2003, the cap at 50,000 equaled the number of volunteers who were enrolled during the previous year. More revealingly, this number came up short of pre-9/11 enrollment numbers, which totaled 53,000 in 2000 and 59,200 in 2001.

On the legislative front, the primary roadblock to Bush's national service initiatives was the leadership of his own political party and their antipathy toward AmeriCorps. Today, these individuals are no longer on Capitol Hill and Obama has the benefit of sizeable Democratic majorities in both the Senate and House of Representatives. Yet, as all presidents discover, Congress will throw its weight around in the domestic policy arena. Bush's experiences suggest that “going public” is not always a viable alternative to engaging in difficult negotiations with the Congress. Effective presidential leadership demands the skillful employment of both strategies.

CONCLUSION

⁵² DiIulio, May 20, 2004.

⁵³ Bridgeland, May 19, 2004.

George W. Bush's adventures in the national service policy arena demonstrate that a president's effectiveness is not determined simply by the powers of the office, but also by the incumbent's leadership abilities. As Michael A. Genovese clarifies:

Leadership is a complex phenomenon revolving around influence — the ability to move others in desired directions. Successful leaders are those who can take full advantage of their opportunities, resources, and skills.⁵⁴

To borrow an analogy from Genovese, Bush was dealt an extremely promising hand of cards in the wake of 9/11, but he played these cards poorly. By declaring four days after the attacks that Americans would have to “make no sacrifice whatsoever,” Bush rendered his future efforts in this arena effectively obsolete. He had all of the resources that he needed at his disposal — historically-high approval ratings, a compliant Congress, a skillful aide in Bridgeland and, most importantly, an already-mobilized American public. As a result, John DiIulio argues, success with the national service issue should have been the equivalent of the most reliable shot in basketball — it's one of those things “that would look and appear to be so easy...it's just a lay-up. Freedom Corps ought to [have been] a lay-up.”⁵⁵

The opportunity was squandered because Bush waited too long to take his shot at the basket. As Obama's White House chief-of-staff, Rahm Emanuel, explained in reference to the current financial crisis: “You never want a serious crisis to go to waste...it's an opportunity to do things you could not do before.”⁵⁶ In the aftermath of 9/11, the Bush Administration aggressively embraced this mantra in pursuit of its foreign policy and national security agenda; and yet, this wisdom was ignored in the arena of national service policy-making.

As Bush's “window of opportunity” closed in the months following 9/11, his resources quickly dissipated and he did not possess the skills to succeed with so little, so late. According to Genovese:

A president who can play to optimum the cards of opportunity, resources, and skill has a chance of succeeding. Such a leader can resemble a superman or leviathan rather than Gulliver, who was tied down by thousands of lesser figures. But unusual is the president who maximizes power. More often, the president resembles the helpless giant enchained by scores of Lilliputians.⁵⁷

In other words, the story of failed leadership is a common one among American presidents. In the national service policy arena, Bush failed to lead and ended up a “helpless giant.” Akin to Bush after 9/11, Obama has been dealt some tremendous cards at the outset of his term. But how will he play his hand?

⁵⁴ Michael A. Genovese, *Memo to a New President: The Art and Science of Presidential Leadership* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.40-41.

⁵⁵ DiIulio, May 20, 2004

⁵⁶ Rahm Emanuel, “Comments at the Wall Street Journal CEO Council,” Washington, D.C., November 19, 2008. <http://online.wsj.com/video/rahm-emanuel-on-the-opportunities-of-crisis/3F6B9880-D1FD-492B-9A3D-70DBE8EB9E97.html>

⁵⁷ Genovese, 2008, p.41.

In his speech on December 5, 2007, in Mt. Vernon, IA, Obama framed the issue of national service as the heart of what it means to be an active American citizen facing the challenges of the 21st century:

Your own story and the American story are not separate — they are shared. And they will both be enriched if we stand up together, and answer a new call to service to meet the challenges of our new century...

We need your service, right now, in this moment — our moment — in history. ...I am going to ask you to play your part; ask you to stand up; ask you to put your foot firmly into the current of history. I am asking you to change history's course.⁵⁸

It was an echo of Bush's "call to service" delivered almost six years earlier in his first State of the Union address after the events of 9/11:

[A]fter America was attacked, it was as if our entire country looked into a mirror and saw our better selves. We were reminded that we are citizens, with obligations to each other, to our country, and to history.

This time of adversity offers a unique moment of opportunity — a moment we must seize to change our culture.⁵⁹

As president, George W. Bush failed to seize the moment of opportunity and change American culture. If Barack Obama truly seeks to change history's course through national service, he must heed the lessons of his predecessor.

⁵⁸ Obama, December 5, 2007.

⁵⁹ Bush, January 29, 2002.