

Through the Looking Glass



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Americorps the Pitiful

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Introduction

In 1992, presidential candidate Bill Clinton pledged he would renew the spirit of community service by creating a program to promote volunteerism on the part of high school and college students. What he didn't say is when educational awards, living stipends, and administrative costs were factored in, his AmeriCorps program would cost an average of \$27,000 annually per "volunteer."

Although the president claims that AmeriCorps volunteers are "doing work that won't get done any other way," volunteer and charitable activity is, in fact, flourishing among college students across the country. In reality, instead of an army of selfless do-gooders envisioned by the president, AmeriCorps recruits have become just another layer of taxpayer-subsidized bureaucrats, working in government agencies or mimicking the work of lobbyists and political organizers for agenda-driven community organizations.

AmeriCorps' track record of imbuing students with a sense of "opportunity and responsibility" is dismal. Nearly 40 percent of AmeriCorps employees drop out of the program.¹ Meanwhile, the program's budget has doubled, from \$217 million in 1994 to \$438.5 million for fiscal year 1999.

The Genesis of AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps, which was heralded as a domestic version of the Peace Corps, is the largest national and community "service" program since the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s. Its parent organization, the Corporation for National Service (CNS), was created in 1993 to administer several federal service grant programs, including AmeriCorps. The program has three statutory goals: to advance youth volunteerism; to use volunteers to address pressing community problems; and to leverage private sector financial support using CNS grants as seed money. These goals are supposedly achieved by giving volunteers an "educational award" to help pay for college or pay off student loans. Thus, AmeriCorps helps those students who would normally not be able to afford college tuition.

AmeriCorps is open to young adults who are at least 17 years of age, and who have earned a high school diploma (or the equivalent) or will earn it during their AmeriCorps tenure. AmeriCorps recruits who fulfill their end of the bargain can earn an award of \$4,725 for their college education. They earn the full amount in exchange for full-time service and half of that amount for part-time service. A minimum of 1,700 hours of service within a year, or 10 months of work, is required to earn the full \$4,725 award. In addition to the educational award, full-time participants receive a living allowance stipend that ranges between \$7,640 and \$15,280 annually, as well as other benefits, including health insurance and child care.²

Withered Volunteerism

The most obvious and striking anomaly about AmeriCorps is that, despite all the grand rhetoric, it is not a volunteer program at all. Rather, it recruits college-age students for paid positions and then uses taxpayers dollars to subsidize the organizations and agencies that hire these recruits. Organizations that would like to be certified as AmeriCorps sites must submit proposals and compete to be selected by state commissions. In 1995, according to the General Accounting Office (GAO), there were more than 400 certified AmeriCorps sites.³ Until 1996, other taxpayer-funded federal agencies, such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the Department of Energy could qualify as AmeriCorps sites.⁴ In this scenario, federally funded agencies and departments hire unskilled, entry-level workers from another federally funded agency and call it "volunteerism."

The recruits hired by AmeriCorps cost taxpayers a bundle. An August 1995 GAO audit of 93 AmeriCorps grantees found that "programs operated by nonprofit, state, and local agencies received about \$25,800 in cash and in-kind contributions per participant. . . in contrast to \$31,000 for federal agency grantees."⁵

Current AmeriCorps Director Harris Wofford argues that AmeriCorps is necessary because people are volunteering less and that most of their volunteer work consists of baby-sitting or singing in a church choir. Thus, reasons Wofford, if the nation wants to give local groups more control over important community functions and activities, taxpayers should pay volunteers to strengthen those organizations.

There are several problems with this argument. First, Wofford argues that civic enterprises are flagging, and second, he asserts that the reason for this phenomenon is the paucity of volunteers. However, the facts contradict him on both points.

The volunteer sector in the United States is fundamentally robust. According to a biennial survey by Independent Sector, a Washington-based nonprofit group that monitors volunteerism, almost 93 million Americans put in a combined 20.3 billion hours of community service in 1995. This is up from 89.2 million volunteers who offered 19.7 billion hours of service in 1993.⁷ Campus-based student volunteer groups are expanding, and more schools are encouraging students to volunteer by broadening their regular curricula to include service jobs.⁷ Americans spend an average of more than 4 hours a week working in soup kitchens, tutoring, and building low-income housing, for example.

By comparison, 20,000 AmeriCorps volunteers are a relatively insignificant portion of the overall volunteer picture. Critics say that efforts such as baby-sitting and bake sales should not be counted as volunteering, but who is to decide what constitutes volunteerism? The beauty of traditionally understood volunteerism is that it flourishes outside the purview of any reporting and regulatory apparatus and is not required to meet any government's definition of community service.

In addition to its inherent contradictions, AmeriCorps is not a transparent program. Program recruits do not receive money directly. Instead, funds flow through multiple layers, first to the groups selected by state commissions, and then, in many cases, further downstream to subgrantees, and lastly to the recruits. Although it can be argued that many of the AmeriCorps sites are engaged in traditional charitable work, many of the groups and organizations who take on AmeriCorps recruits are political in nature, governmental in origin, and national in scope. Indeed, thousands of taxpayer-financed AmeriCorps recruits were assigned to work for political

advocacy organizations that either were heavily dependent upon federal funding or had missions to agitate for increased federal spending:

- The Los Angeles Times reported that, in 1994, AmeriCorps funded a project that used the program's recruits to protest legislation designed to put violent criminals in prison for life after a third violent crime.⁸
- In 1995, AmeriCorps gave a large grant to an advocacy group called ACORN (Association for Community Organizations for Reform Now). AmeriCorps recruits were assigned to lobby for legislation, collect dues, register voters, and participate in political demonstrations. After its activities came under scrutiny by AmeriCorps' own Inspector General, the ACORN Housing Corporation was forced to return a \$1.1 million grant.⁹
- Although federal agencies can no longer receive AmeriCorps grants, local subgrantees of federal agencies can still qualify as AmeriCorps sites. In the past, AmeriCorps recruits have been tasked to the Department of Justice, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Legal Services Corporation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. AmeriCorps placed nearly 3,000 of its first 20,000 recruits in such federal agencies.¹⁰

AmeriCorps funding was touted as an enabling mechanism to increase private volunteer activity. According to President Clinton:

While the federal government will provide seed money for national service, we are determined that the participants — the individuals who serve the groups that sponsor their service — will guide the process. Spending tens of millions of tax dollars to build a massive bureaucracy would be self-defeating.¹¹

Yet 83 percent of AmeriCorps funding continues to come from the taxpayer. A GAO report found that in 1994-95, total resources available per AmeriCorps participant averaged \$26,654, of which about \$17,000 came from AmeriCorps, \$3,200 from other federal sources, and \$4,000 from state and local governments. The remaining amount —roughly \$1,800, a meager one percent — came from the private sector.¹² Further, AmeriCorps recruits cannot claim to attract volunteers for the organizations they work for. A study of the program for the Independent Sector found that the presence of AmeriCorps recruits created only a "3.5 percent increase in hours volunteered by genuine volunteers."¹³

That figure should come as no surprise since nearly half of the AmeriCorps recruits either quit or are fired from their paid positions before their year long term is up. The GAO discerned a troubling pattern of recruits being fired as a result of chronic truancy and criminal activities, including felonies. Some quit midstream for other jobs, which is ironic because AmeriCorps is supposed to awaken a sense of duty and community responsibility in its volunteers.¹⁴

And the president's vision of helping recruits attend college has also not materialized. Though AmeriCorps was supposed to help young people pay for college in exchange for community service, only 54 percent of those eligible for educational awards have actually used them.¹⁵ In Des Moines, Iowa, "nearly one in five AmeriCorps workers. . . already has a college degree and more than half in the program are 26 or older."¹⁶ Contrary to the aims of the program, it seems many AmeriCorps members either are not planning to attend college or are not college graduates saddled with student loans. In form and substance, AmeriCorps has become a public jobs

program.

Rotten to the AmeriCorps: Persistent Waste and Abuse

Not only is AmeriCorps ineffective, it also wastes a lot of money in the process of failing to achieve its mission. Examples from two recent studies of local AmeriCorps programs demonstrate how mismanagement and waste have run rampant:

- The Casa Verde Builders Program, a Texas-based site where recruits help build energy efficient homes, was awarded a \$2.5 million AmeriCorps grant. Only 23 of the 64 AmeriCorps recruits assigned to Casa Verde completed their tour, yet Casa Verde was able to keep its entire grant. The ultimate estimated cost to taxpayers per participant was more than \$100,000.¹⁷
- The Educational Conservation Corps (ECC), in which participants work to help improve water quality and thereby increase the salmon population, got a \$1.7 million grant. Of the 97 AmeriCorps recruits tasked to the ECC, only 20 used their education awards. The cost to taxpayers was \$86,000 per recruit in administrative costs, plus the \$4,725 per recruit in individual educational awards.¹⁸ The ECC pocketed the difference.

Despite several audits of AmeriCorps' books by the GAO and the CNS's own Inspector General, its financial records were pronounced "unauditable."¹⁹ And the CNS itself has been riddled with mismanagement and financial abuses. The accounting firm Arthur Andersen found that the CNS's "internal controls were not adequate for an independent auditor to perform an effective and efficient financial statement audit in accordance with generally accepted auditing standards for fiscal years 1994 and 1995."²⁰ Auditors came to the same conclusion in 1996.

Reading for Funding and Profit

Despite the litany of failures and abuses, AmeriCorps not only survives, it thrives. The Clinton White House apparently regards the program as part of its legacy and has fought long and hard to protect it from budget hawks. For a chance to live to see another fiscal year, AmeriCorps officials have not only repeatedly promised to improve the management of the program, but have also tried to morph themselves into a literacy program.

At the President's Summit for America's Future, held in Philadelphia in April 1997, President Clinton announced his goal of putting one million volunteer literacy tutors in public schools around the nation. The president, who recognized an opportunity to capitalize upon a popular political issue and give the AmeriCorps program a new *raison d'être* at the same time, asked college presidents to convert federal work-study (FWS) slots into AmeriCorps positions for his new initiative, America Reads.

This sort of bureaucratic mission creep is a hackneyed but reliable tool for bureaucrats and politicians seeking to sustain funding for government programs that have failed or outlived their usefulness. It will help blur the distinction between AmeriCorps and the widely used and highly popular FWS program on college campuses.

In the FWS program, students are allowed to perform on- and off-campus jobs at an hourly rate that is higher than minimum wage. Federal funds are funneled through the university to subsidize employers. The FWS program receives 75 percent of its funding from the federal government

and universities kick in the remaining 25 percent. Under the president's new America Reads initiative, all FWS slots devoted to America Reads would be fully funded by the federal government.

Ideally, America Reads was supposed to mobilize a citizen army of reading volunteers to help ensure that all children could read at their grade level by eight years of age. President Clinton asked for a \$2.5 billion increase in AmeriCorps spending over three years to fund this program. Though Congress cut this request sharply (to \$200 million over three years), the White House is still moving ahead with plans to merge FWS and AmeriCorps into America Reads. In this way, AmeriCorps money would begin to flow into an even wider pool of recipients (colleges and universities), thus broadening the program's constituency and political support, making its eradication more difficult.

In 1997, the CNS sent a memorandum to colleges with tips on how to facilitate the integration of "FWS participants into national service programs supported by the Corporation for National Service." It noted that colleges can use up to 10 percent of FWS money to support AmeriCorps and other national service programs and that, in turn, AmeriCorps money can be spent to "support campus-based community service programs that include FWS students as participants."²¹

However, flooding elementary schools with reading volunteers, most of whom have not yet graduated from college and are untutored in the intricacies of reading pedagogy, may actually be counterproductive. Recent testimony and articles by G. Reid Lyon, Ph.D., director of the National Institute of Child Health and Development, make it clear that tutors unschooled in reading techniques will not stem the tide of children's illiteracy:

The need for informed instruction for the millions of children with insufficient reading skills is an increasingly urgent problem. Unfortunately, several recent studies and surveys of teacher knowledge about reading development and difficulties indicate that many teachers are underprepared to teach reading. . . At present, motivated teachers are often left on their own to obtain specific skills in teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, reading fluency, and comprehension by seeking out workshops or specialized instruction manuals. Many teachers report that they are tied to "packaged" reading programs, regardless of the quality of the programs or their usefulness for all children, because they do not understand the reading process well enough to augment the programs or to select different instructional strategies for different children. Thus the requirements that a student may be expected to satisfy for a college degree may bear little relationship to the requirement for a teaching certificate.²²

Conclusion

AmeriCorps was hailed by President Clinton as a catalyst for strengthening community service and youth volunteerism. Instead, it stands as the antithesis to this idea by inviting nonprofit organizations to hold their hands out to the federal government for help and advancing the notion that volunteers should be paid with taxpayer dollars. It has redefined volunteering as a compensated activity.

AmeriCorps has become a showcase for the waste, abuse and cynical political manipulation inherent in many federally subsidized civic enterprises. Paying a stipend to these high school and college-age volunteers demeans the efforts of thousands of other young adults who volunteer simply because they care. Indeed, AmeriCorps recruits, nearly 40 percent of whom drop out of the program, have failed to catch the volunteer "spirit," despite getting paid for their work. Nor is there the slightest evidence that the program has infected others with the volunteer "bug." AmeriCorps is the no-show job of the new millennium.

In the private voluntary organizations of America, such bloated overhead, inappropriate diversion of funds, and persistently inauditable books would be grounds for the dismissal of executives, the overhaul of the governing board, management shakeups, and possibly an IRS audit. Yet, under the not-so-watchful eye of the Clinton Administration, not only have mismanagement and abuse gone uncured, but these practices have been rewarded with budget increases, underwritten with the involuntary contributions of taxpayers.

Because AmeriCorps has failed to fulfill its mission or manage its books successfully, it continues to exist now only because of the Clinton Administration and its proponents in Congress. AmeriCorps, which was supposed to encourage volunteerism in the private sector, is now being reconstituted into a literacy program. This will do nothing to raise literacy scores, but is sure to furnish the president with a plethora of rousing sound bites and touching photo opportunities.

In the final analysis, AmeriCorps is one of the most expensive and longest running political commercials in history. Taxpayers, and especially the 90 million American volunteers who give of themselves to important causes without government help, deserve better.

ENDNOTES

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