



# Obama's call to service can't start soon enough

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As Barack Obama's economic advisers work with Congress, they are turning to weighty academic studies of the Great Depression. But for inspiration, they should also read an Obama favorite: Jonathan Alter's *The Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope*.

Central to Alter's account is that Roosevelt created not only jobs but also a renewed belief in the future when he insisted that the nation quickly mobilize what was called his Tree Army. Weeks after taking the oath, he proposed the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Congress gave its blessing and, less than four months later, about 275,000 young men were working in the woods.

Over the next nine years, more than 3 million worked for the CCC, planting 3 billion trees, developing 800 parks, protecting 40 million acres from erosion, building 47,000 bridges and clearing 28,000 miles of trails. The CCC was the most popular initiative of the New Deal and made Roosevelt the father of the national service movement.

## Obama's plan

During his campaign, Obama proposed a detailed plan to increase the size of AmeriCorps from 75,000 to 250,000 annual members. The question now is whether President Obama will incorporate his pledge into his first 100 days, or whether he will postpone action, possibly letting it wither. The case for expanding national service is compelling.

First, it would meet pressing domestic needs. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that if unemployment rises to 9%, the number of Americans driven into poverty will increase by anywhere from 7 million to 10 million. Expanding the number of AmeriCorps volunteers working with low-income families in schools, clinics and non-profits is one of the fastest and least expensive ways to reinforce our social safety net.

Second, the bulk of service expansion would provide jobs for those hardest hit by unemployment: the young. A Northeastern University study found that the percentage of summer teen employment has dropped from 45% in 2000 to 33% last year. Stories abound of graduating seniors facing a tough job market. Expanding national service could put at least 250,000 more young people to work. The total government cost per year of a full-time AmeriCorps member is \$10,970.

Third, expanding national service would be a sound investment by building upon a proven foundation that is ready to scale rapidly. Last year, the 75,000 AmeriCorps members worked with 4,600 non-profits across the country, helping crucial organizations such as the Boys and Girls Clubs, Habitat for Humanity and the Red Cross fulfill their missions.

## Help after Katrina

Those same AmeriCorps members helped to recruit and manage 1.7 million volunteers, building homes in areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina, preventing kids from dropping out, providing health services in local clinics and weatherizing homes.

Fourth, national service brings new energy and ideas to non-profits and governmental bureaucracies. Some 60% of AmeriCorps alums go into public service.

Fifth, as Obama has proposed, national service, such as AmeriCorps, can help young people earn some money to help pay for college. The GI Bill lifted a whole generation after World War II; linking national service to college education can do the same today.

Finally, expanded national service would build on the growing idealism Obama unleashed. Applications for Teach for America are expected to rise again this year, with as many as 37,000 for 5,000 positions. Last year, AmeriCorps had three applicants for every opening.

With Obama calling for a national day of service on Monday — Martin Luther King Jr. Day — and likely to summon, at his inaugural, Americans to sacrifice, demand is certain to grow. Can we afford to let this renewed idealism go untapped?

Ultimately, a commitment to national service is a statement about the kind of country we are. It is about renewing our civic culture and building a more united citizenry thanks to a shared experience. The goal is that one day, women and men will ask each other, "So what did you do in your year of service to the country?"

The moment has come for a president — echoing great leaders from Lincoln, to Roosevelt to Kennedy — to call forth Americans to an era of common sacrifice. The moment is Obama's to seize.

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