

# 'You Don't Have to Wear a Military Uniform to Serve your Country'

By Stanley A. McChrystal

In 1838, a 28-year-old Abraham Lincoln declared that the greatest threat facing America comes not from a foreign invader:

*If it ever reach us it must spring up amongst us; it cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen we must live through all time, or die by suicide.*

The thought that Americans, themselves, may destroy the ideals for which so many have sacrificed is sobering. Trust among Americans is at its lowest levels in generations, and stereotyping and prejudice have become substitutes for knowing and understanding one another as individuals.

How Americans restore trust may be an existential question for their country, then, but it's ultimately a practical one: What U.S. society needs to answer it in the coming years aren't lamentations but practical measures, especially among the emerging generations that will define America's future.

Service may be at the heart of the answer. A year of service has the power to bring young people together from different races, ethnicities, incomes, faiths, and political backgrounds to work on pressing problems facing U.S. society today. In the process, they can build empathy by getting to know each other around something positive—the shared work of participating in a democracy—as they shape their views of their country and the world.

The danger of inaction should be clear. Tensions and violence in cities across America are reminders of how quickly communities can erupt with an absence of social trust. Dallas, St. Paul, Baton Rouge, and Orlando, following on the heels of Ferguson, Baltimore, and Chicago illustrate a disheartening reality.

Political campaigns offer Americans an opportunity to adjust direction, reaffirm values, and recommit to the covenant that binds them together. But politics can also summon the smaller side of America's national character, offering final glimpses of desperately needed big ideas and real solutions before they go up in political smoke, disappearing in favor of what's popular or easy.

As the presidential candidates head to their national conventions, they should advance ideas to help restore social trust in the United States—practical solutions, such as engaging young Americans in a year or more of national service.

Imagine for a moment a large-scale commitment to offering young Americans who are black and white, rich and poor, Republican and Democrat, and Christian, Jewish, and Muslim opportunities to work side by side, serving their country together. The focus of their service year would be teaching, tutoring, and mentoring disadvantaged students; cleaning neighborhoods in need of renewal; renovating homes in blighted areas; and helping veterans reintegrate into their communities.

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Young Americans could be paid a modest living stipend, work in teams, and build relationships with one another by solving problems together. Beyond the valuable work they would do to improve their country, young Americans would develop the powerful habits of citizenship as well as the leadership and professional skills that help them grow and stand out with their future employers.

In my 34 years in the military, I saw young men and women work with people of different backgrounds, learn the values of teamwork and discipline, rise to common challenges, and discover they were leaders. I've also seen firsthand that service ethic in community-based nonprofits like City Year, Teach for America, YouthBuild, Green City Force, Earth Conservation Corps, and other AmeriCorps programs. It is clear to me that you don't have to wear a military uniform to serve your country.

Presidents since Washington have summoned Americans to serve their country in times of crisis—Washington in the Revolution; Lincoln in the Civil War; FDR in the Great Depression; Kennedy in the Cold War; Johnson in the War on Poverty; Clinton to strengthen community and access to college; and Bush after 9/11. National service and civic engagement are old ideas, but they are in need of renewal. It's entirely feasible for the United States to create 1 million service-year positions each year by the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 2026. We should do it.

The American Founders believed the "pursuit of happiness" was not just an individual right, but also a collective undertaking. They worried that in establishing a government so strongly predicated on rights that future generations, distant from the sacrifices that fueled the American Revolution, would neglect their responsibilities. A service year that teaches young Americans the habits of citizenship and the power of working in teams to build trust is one of the most powerful ways this generation can help restore political and civic responsibility—and in the process help to heal a wounded nation.

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