

The Passy Press

Letter to the Editor

From: jcharlesdeahl@undisclosed.com
To: Nick Gardiner enpg@thepassypress.com
Date: January 26, 2016 07:12 EST
Subject: Novitski Essay December 2015

Dear Sir

If the United States ever should institute a two-year requirement for national service by its young adult citizens, then surely the Passy Press will be recognized for its role in fostering this societal change. John MacMurray in his September, 2014, essay outlined the need of such service, and now Joe Novitski has further detailed the benefit to be derived.

Below I will applaud Mr. Novitski for his logical and creative solution to several of the country's problems, but first, because the opportunity has presented itself, I want to thank him for writing the most concise and accurate explanation I ever read of the malaise that has washed over American public education. In a previously published essay, he revealed what he saw when he returned to California in 1978 after the passage of Proposition 13. He realized that "beneath the surface, the message was clear: the senior American generation would no longer pay to educate the country's younger generation. California voters had decoupled the American present from the society's future."

Now Mr. Novitski brings his perceptive analysis to the subject of a "coalescing American oligarchy," and I see a continuous line of reasoning from his views on education. Every time I encounter references to our non-volunteer military, I hear the same "decoupling." Our soldiers are heroes, we owe them everything, and one reason we owe them so much is because they are not like us. We have more resources; we have more sense. You of the underprivileged classes, you of the limited future possibilities, go to the antipodes and sacrifice body and brain and we will reward you with the sobriquet of honor.

A national service commitment for all young Americans could transform the relationship between the nation and the military, "identifying every citizen at an early age with some segment of our country's common goals," in Mr. Novitski's words. Young army recruits would come from a different place, from a preference for military action, and not from a need to follow a defined path when all other paths were blocked or obscured.

My interest in education, especially in public secondary education, suggests to me another quite likely benefit of a service requirement. Keep in mind that the oft-vilified public high school has had for sixty years to run on three cylinders. After the creation of the Scholastic Aptitude Test, colleges found it comfortable to make admission decisions long before the end of the senior year of high school. The seniors noticed. They contributed their interest and support to the prom, but certainly not to their second semester classes. If, under a new system, colleges were logically to admit their freshmen after the two years of service, and not try to pull a fast one and admit them before, then high school transcripts would once again be a measure of the actual time spent in school.

Mr. Novitski admits that funding the Interns for Democracy program would be a challenge, and at first thought it seems that such a sea change in the social order is beyond the realm of possibility. But my second thought, if I rein in my narrow-mindedness, leads me to see a way toward acceptance. My near-automatic assumption in our polarized political atmosphere is that if I like an idea, it is on my side of the right-left divide, and everyone on the other side hates the idea. Is it possible that universal service is a concept too big to be either conservative or liberal? The fiscal conservatives who seek to limit spending on new or existing programs are also often strong supporters of increases in military spending. If they look through the lens of expanding the resource pool for the military, they could well be attracted to a valid expenditure. Elected officials considering unemployed young people in poverty conditions in our inner cities often divide over whether welfare programs should be provided. The service commitment, which entails just that, commitment, could easily please both those who think society needs to do more for the disadvantaged young and those who think that those same youth need to do more for the society. Young men and women contributing to a labor force to mend our rusting infrastructure would have no union affiliations, not even inclinations, and those who fear the power of organized labor could rest easy. A major issue confronting the nation, immigration, has created the Dreamers. Their status on one hand as illegal and on the other as de facto citizens could be merged by two years of service to please both those who see our borders as too open and those who see them as too closed.

Interns for Democracy (my choice might be to stick with VISTA) are a grand idea, a noble idea. I hope John MacMurray and Joe Novitski and the Passy Press can show its colors to the country.

Sincerely,

Charles Deahl

Charles Deahl is an American educator living in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York and a member of the Junto founded by Benjamin Franklin.