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“And so my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country.”

– John F. Kennedy (Famous Quotes)

These words were delivered to the American people during President John F. Kennedy’s inauguration speech on January 20, 1961. The statement holds a simple yet true message that is still applicable today. America is the land of opportunity, with endless possibilities to grow and succeed. Citizens of other countries look to America in awe of our freedoms and quality of life. However, many Americans take these liberties and opportunities for granted. They feel as though the benefits they reap are guaranteed without any need to repay. In this time of war and economic struggle, Americans need to give all they can to help their country, not just obtain the rewards. American soldiers literally give up their lives for our nation. They sacrifice their family life, their civilian jobs, and a “normal” way of life, all to be the glue that holds our country together. In comparison to their valiant efforts, the least that the average citizen can do is volunteer or help this country in some small way. A nation cannot be held together by a small group alone. Everyone must contribute in order for our country to prosper. Service fosters patriotism and unity, leading to a stronger and more united nation. All citizens should be required to perform some type of service to our country, whether it is military or otherwise.

Military service is a commitment and honor that is most highly regarded. I have utmost respect for those who are devoted to the protection of our nation and are willing to give up their lives for this cause. However, military service may not be

2 suitable for all people due to physical limitations, age, or other reasons. Despite this, service is still needed in many other areas aside from the various military branches. There are many other ways to serve aside from the military. Within each community, there are many organizations that require help from civilian volunteers.

The concept of serving one's country without being in the military is not a new one. During World War II, the United States was at a shortage of resources and supplies. The government rationed staples such as eggs, cheese, sugar, butter, coffee and meat, as part of the war effort. Citizens were asked to contribute by planting their own fruits and vegetables in so-called "Victory Gardens" (Living History Farm). American citizens stepped up to the plate in order to assist their country in time of need. The US Department of Agriculture estimates that 20 million Victory Gardens were planted during World War II, yielding nine to ten million tons of fruits and vegetables (Living History Farm). Although many Americans on the home front did not directly serve in the war, their efforts in planting these gardens made a large impact on the overall success of the war effort. Their efforts proof that any contribution, whether large or small should be required of citizens to ensure a united and patriotic nation.

More recently, an increasing number of Americans volunteer to serve their communities on a regular basis. According to the 2010 Volunteering in America report released by the Corporation for National and Community Service, the number of Americans volunteering in their communities increased by 1.6 million last year (Serve.gov). In 2009 more than 63.4 million Americans volunteered. They provided

8.1 billion hours of service which is worth an estimated \$169 billion (Serve.gov). These volunteers' actions are evidence that small efforts truly do make a difference. These citizens simply chose to volunteer and serve out of the goodness of their hearts, but one can only imagine the impact service would have if it was required by all citizens.

The service that should be required need not be in the form of the military or some other life-risking venture. America is a diverse melting pot brimming with people from all cultures, religions, and backgrounds. Our country is filled with citizens who possess talents and strengths that are just as diverse as the people themselves. Individuals should serve based on their own unique interests and abilities. Those who enjoy cooking should employ their skills at a soup kitchen, those who have skills in architecture should build homes, those who enjoy working with children should help at summer reading camps, and so on. If each American served in a way that fit their own talents and skills, the nation could build a serving force that would be unbreakable.

Service should also be based on the needs of the community at the present time. The recent BP Oil Spill on the Gulf Coast is one of the most expansive and challenging natural disasters our country has ever encountered. Communities surrounding the Gulf Coast were greatly affected and are still in need of assistance regarding clothing, food, employment assistance, and other social services (Nationalservice.gov). The Corporation for National and Community Service has developed a plan for reviving the affected area and is in need of volunteers.

Residents of Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, and Alabama are encouraged to find ways to serve their community in this time of disaster recovery. Aid at a national level may not be enough to recuperate from the devastation of the oil spill. The service of local volunteers becomes vital to contribute to the success of recovery.

My 80-year-old grandmother is a prime example of a citizen who gives her all in order to help others. She volunteers weekly at a used clothing store called Saint Vincent DePaul. Since she is talented in the area of arts and crafts, she regularly delivers favors holding candy to the Ronald MacDonald house, a local shelter where families can stay when their ill children are hospitalized. My grandma continues to give and give, to everyone from her neighbors to her friends to the mailman, and never expects a thing in return. If citizens were somehow required to have the serving and generous attitude of my grandmother, our nation would be a much better place.

As a member of National Honor Society in high school, I was required to perform forty hours of community service per year. I engaged in many different volunteer activities throughout my two years in the program. My experiences varied from serving senior citizens ice cream at a nursing home, to tutoring elementary school children after school, to packing canned goods for the Kiwanis Club to deliver for holiday meals. However, no matter the activity I performed, the service I provided gave me a sense of happiness in knowing that I was helping someone in need. It is a special and selfless experience to know that you made a difference in someone's day, and all citizens should be required to have this experience.

John D. Rockefeller, Jr. once said, “I believe that every right implies a responsibility; every opportunity, an obligation; every possession, a duty” (Quote Garden). Nothing in life is free. We often depend on others to serve and in turn may take the rights, liberties, and opportunities we have for granted. Citizens should not expect to receive unless they contribute in some way. Providing service to others is not only helpful, but it gives the volunteers a sense of belonging and purpose in knowing that they are very much needed. No matter how large or small the contribution, some type of service should be mandatory of all citizens. The effort may seem small at the time, but the impact of serving can last a lifetime.

Works Cited

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