

Joseph Kearns Goodwin on one sure way to heal America

The military veteran says we can end our

bitter political stalemate by making it easier for young people to serve their country — in the military or outside of it.



JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

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My friend Mark is a construction worker in Quincy, and we disagree about a lot of things when it comes to the politics and policies of our nation. But ours is a friendship forged on the battlegrounds of Iraq. That experience created camaraderie and mutual respect; we take each other's views seriously. We may differ, but we find common ground in our shared love for this country and our hopes for its future.

We live in a deeply divided America, riddled with ideological fault lines and a toxic public discourse that has made it commonplace to say we cannot understand one another or engage in a shared dialogue. Had I not been in the military, I would probably not be so willing to understand someone so different from myself.

Extended military deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan provided my experience with national service. In Iraq, the 30 men in my platoon represented many races, classes, political ideologies, and geographic regions of our great country. And the relationships we developed in the fires of that shared experience, including my friendship with Mark, live on today. I could have found a similar experience through other kinds of national service, like the AmeriCorps-funded programs Teach for America, City Year, and YouthBuild. These nonmilitary service programs face intense budget pressure. It is essential that the federal government not only maintain funding for them, but also look for ways to expand them so that all young Americans could participate.

No less a figure than Theodore Roosevelt argued that bringing together people of different class and caste was key to creating the “fellow-feeling” needed for social cooperation. Expanding our national service programs would let more young Americans interact with people different from themselves while sharing a goal. Serving with other kinds of people creates awareness of what matters to others, and openness to compromise. Such experiences would help erase pervasive divisiveness.

I saw this idea in action recently when I directed a conference, Reconnect America, at the Kennedy School’s Institute of Politics. We brought together 70 students from 28 colleges and universities across the country: a military academy, a historically black university, and conservative and liberal schools. The conference mission was to move beyond a diagnosis — America’s divided! — and begin to develop solutions.

For many participants, the three-day session was the first time they had engaged in significant conversations with contemporaries who held fundamentally different political opinions. At the start, it was clear that these young Americans viewed those unlike them as “the other,” people divorced

from reality. Forced to share common ground, or at least conference rooms, they started to see one another for what they all are: well-intentioned individuals who care deeply about their country.

Yes, they had serious disagreements on how the country should proceed. But as the dialogue advanced, they realized they all wanted to see a more civil America, one with widespread opportunities and the prospect of prosperity. On the final day, one conservative student wrote about how their views of liberals had changed: “. . . we assumed they are irresponsible. They are not. We assumed they feel entitled. They do not.” He also thought liberal students had realized that the conservatives were not bigoted and selfish. Preconceived notions were largely dispelled in a matter of days.

One of this diverse group’s chief goals for reconnecting America was to recommend boosting the country’s commitment to national service programs. That reflects a January survey of more than 750 US citizens aged 18 to 29 conducted by the Institute of Politics and commissioned for this conference, which found that fully 64 percent of Republicans and 61 percent of Democrats polled supported legislation to create a comprehensive national service program for Americans younger than 25.

Our country’s own history suggests the powerful benefits of national service. In the 1960s, some 70 percent of America’s representatives in Congress had served in the armed forces, the majority during World War II.

That generation led the development of civil rights, voting rights, Medicare, the moon landing, and so much more. These historic accomplishments required transcending party and ideological lines — cooperation that seems almost inconceivable today.

Let us hope that in these turbulent times we learn from our history. Serving the nation — whether in the military or through a program like City Year — is

critical to cultivating the sense of duty and shared purpose we need to rebuild the human infrastructure of our civic life. Yes, enhancing these programs will have a financial cost. But, as Americans, we should be asked to do more than simply pay taxes and obey the law.

Here's what you can do to help: Tell your representatives and senators in Washington you want to see them reach across the aisle to fund an expanded national service plan, encompassing the military, AmeriCorps, the Peace Corps, and programs still to be created. As veterans of national service move into jobs in all parts of society, they will help create a culture that is more civil and more open to compromise, and that encourages us to have compassion for those unlike ourselves. That will help make America a brighter place for all.

Joseph Kearns Goodwin is a veteran and founder of National Service Now, a nonprofit working to create national service opportunities for all Americans. Send comments to magazine@globe.com. Follow us on Twitter [@BostonGlobeMag](https://twitter.com/BostonGlobeMag).

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