

Clinton calls for National Service

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Last Friday, September 30, Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton announced a plan to institute a National Service Reserve for the purpose of recruiting five million young people between the ages of 18 and 30 for a minimum of a year of service. This initiative is not a milquetoast “reform” as it is being described in the media, but represents a dangerous shift towards wider wars abroad and a more militarized society at home.

While she packaged the idea as a local/national volunteer force, Clinton’s proposed corps are modeled after the Armed Forces Reserves. Volunteers would receive “basic training” and be on-call for natural disaster, public health campaigns or “other projects,” according to the *Washington Post*.

In return, Clinton offers possible college credits, time off from work and/or a “modest” living expense for volunteers, contingent on demonstrated financial need. Significantly, the federal government would not pay even for these limited rations; her plan suggests she will negotiate with corporations to do so.

Clinton also called for tripling the size of AmeriCorps from 75,000 to 250,000, increasing its loan forgiveness/stipend allocation to a miserable \$23,000 for two years of full-time work plus another year in public service. Finally she advocated for the expansion of the Peace Corps and the enlistment of the over-55 age bracket for volunteer opportunities.

She has advertised the Reserve corps as an appeal to the “volunteering spirit” of millennials whose support she needs in November. Posted comments online, however, reacting to media reports indicates that most of the intended audience would prefer student-loan forgiveness and a decently-paying job rather than working for near-free. Even more fundamentally, they are deeply skeptical of the military implications of National Service.

Indeed, such proposals—always of a militarist character—have periodically arisen in the US, but are now receiving significant political traction. In fact, National Service fits in with the outlook and aims outlined in the recent Atlantic Council document *The Future of the Army*

. Among other measures, the policy paper calls for an expansion of military personnel, both career and part-time. It suggests the creation of an Army Civilian Volunteer Auxiliary Corps, an idea not dissimilar to the National Service Reserves.

With an eye to the “age of perpetual war” and social breakdown at home, *The Future of the Army* states, “The lines between military and civilian, active and reserves, volunteers and retirees need to become far more blurred.”

In other words, policymakers are demanding the militarization of large swathes of American society, with millions of “reservists” on call for military duties. The report also cautions, the Army must “address how to bring large numbers of new recruits into a growing force” and identify “the talents it might want to rapidly access if the Selective Service were to institute a draft.”

National Service, even if at first voluntary, would mark a step in this direction. In fact, Clinton’s concept has been developed by General Stanley McChrystal, the career four-star general responsible for five years of war crimes in Afghanistan, together with the high-level American think-tank The Aspen Institute.

In the wake of the huge support for Bernie Sanders among young people coupled with a rising combativity within the working class, Clinton’s plans dovetails not only with the interests of the financial elite to prepare for new wars, but especially to enable the promotion of American nationalism and militarism as a battering ram against a rising class consciousness.

This becomes clear when examining the statements of advocates for National Service. Some appear in unexpected places. The major K-12 journal, *Education Week*—which usually concerns itself with issues which directly bear on primary and secondary schooling—ran a commentary in mid-September entitled “The Case for Universal National Service”. It is authored by James H. Stone, a man with serious Wall Street bona fides—a former chairman of the Commodity Futures Trading Commission now running a billion-dollar insurance group.

The *Education Week* article calls for mandatory

National Service. It envisions requiring “every young person between 17 and 22 to perform at least one year of service in an approved field”. Stone ranks the options: “1) On the military side, where compensation would almost surely be highest and a two-year enlistment likely required, the need is obvious.” Suggesting “infrastructure” as 2), he states young folks with “basic training” could deal with safe drinking-water and crumbling school facilities. Finally he offers 3) Social Services explaining “there is always more to be done.”

Stone concludes that “universal national service offers the only workable answer to the major issues in American education” and is essential as a “healthy wake-up call for a divided nation... Our nation’s pride, compassion, and national unity would all be increased.”

Such concerns are made even more emphatically by Gen. McChrystal, who is the leading advocate for National Service. McChrystal cites statistics of growing social inequality, worrying that “social trust” is breaking down, in a 2016 article in the *Atlantic*. He warns the ruling elite “how Americans restore trust may be an existential question for their country ... an increasingly shorn society.” The solution? “Bind[ing] our young people to one another and [to] the nation” via National Service, he says in *Politico*.

Clinton’s adoption of the McChrystal program is not surprising. As secretary of state, she found common cause with the general against Obama on the military policy, including on sending more soldiers to Afghanistan. As one of her aides revealingly observed, “She likes the nail-eaters—McChrystal, Petraeus, Keane. Real military guys, not these retired three-stars who go into civilian jobs,” according to the *Atlantic*.

McChrystal is by no means just speaking for himself. While he founded the Franklin Project at the Aspen Institute to advocate for National Service in 2012, the Institute is a major US think tank of business and military leaders. It includes both leading Democrats and Republicans and includes as board members Madeleine Albright, David H. Koch, and Condoleezza Rice. (It is also relevant to note that in 1988 the Democratic Leadership Council, including Bill Clinton, issued a report “Citizenship and National Service” proposing that federal college student aid be conditioned on such service.) In January 2016, the Franklin Project merged with several other groups to form Service Year Alliance, also chaired by McChrystal.

Tae Yoo, a figure at the World Economic Forum and senior vice-president at Cisco, issued a similar warning on

behalf of the ruling elite, pointing to the depth of social anger building up in America, making the extraordinary prediction that the crisis was “leading to a weakened civilization”. As reported in *Huffington Post*, she said, “Young Americans today are facing the crisis of unraveling traditional communities and social structures. In fact, 1 million students drop out of school each year, and 17 percent of youth aged 16 to 24 are out of school and work. This isn’t just a problem about unemployment or a weak future workforce—it escalates to encompass poverty, illiteracy, food insecurity, homelessness and a lack of health care, leading to a weakened civilization.”

Doubling down on the point that the crisis of capitalism is bringing American society to the breaking point, McChrystal emphasized, “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.” McChrystal concluded his July 2016 *Atlantic* article by calling on the presidential candidates to adopt National Service as a policy solution. It appears Clinton answered the call.

The militarization of the labor force—“blurring the lines” between civilian and military personnel—and the use of nationalistic propaganda to “bind the nation” are not new concepts. The 20th century and its two world wars have provided us with the tragic outcome of these outlooks. Young people must turn to the working class and fight to unite it internationally as the great oppositional force to put an end to this rapacious system and construct a new socialist society.



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