

## For a Homeland Protection Force

Amitai Etzioni

**W**e shall soon find out what President Bush meant when he called on Americans to do more than fly, shop, and “get down to Disney World in Florida.” Bush’s director of homeland security, Tom Ridge, is heading a task force to flesh out the president’s call for Americans to volunteer for civil defense. Some 20,000 Americans are to be invited to help police, fire, and public health departments, in ways that remain to be specified. The idea has tremendous potential, but only if it withstands attempts to bend it to advance other agendas—even though these agendas have merit all their own.

True, Americans have already responded to the assault on the United States in a particularly American way: with a grand outpouring of volunteerism ranging from blood donations to cash contributions. There also have been numerous expressions of renewed patriotism: the approval rating of the commander in chief has reached historical heights and buildings and cars have been bedecked with flags.

But. But there are strong sociological reasons to fear that these sentiments will soon dissipate, as the attack—as horrible and unprecedented as it was—recedes into the familiar, and people get caught up again in the routines of their lives. Hence, now is the time to convert the newly heightened willingness to serve into more lasting forms.

### On Guard

The best place to invest this enthusiasm is in homeland protection. It is the place we most need new hands, and there cannot be too many of them. It is the service most directly related to the source of renewed patriotism. And if Americans are busy helping to guard our water resources, dams, borders, airports, and other vital public re-

sources and spaces, they will transform their nagging anxieties into socially productive activities. Indeed, just as one urges depressed couch potatoes, marooned before their TV sets, to get out and do something, so Americans consumed by fear of terrorists should be urged to get off their duffs and actively participate in protecting themselves, their loved ones, and their country.

Some argue that this is the time to restore the draft, enlisting every citizen between the ages of 18 and 25—some four million!—to serve for 18 to 24 months, in the military, homeland security, or other forms of national service such as AmeriCorps. Among the draft's proponents are a leading sociologist who has dedicated a lifetime to studying these matters, Charles Moskos, and Paul Glastris, the editor of the *Washington Monthly*. Advocates of the draft hold that it would result in more qualified people choosing to do their time in the military, and that it would make the military less of a professional elite and more of an army of the people. They believe that from the practice of service to the nation will grow an appreciation of it.

Missing in all such calls-to-arms discussions I have seen is even a crude estimate of the scores of billions of dollars such a draft would cost, and of the other priorities that are going to be shelved to pay for it. And I doubt that serving against one's will is a way to reinforce or instill a commitment to the nation. A draft, after all, is the antithesis of volunteering. And it is sure to revive ugly controversies about who is to be exempt and unsavory attempts to avoid coercive service. Nor ought one to ignore the adverse effects that this cheap labor will have on employment rates and pay levels, especially in a weak economy.

Another attempt to marry Bush's call for homeland protection service with an unrelated agenda is to use the opportunity to expand AmeriCorps and vastly increase the scope of volunteers caring for elderly Americans, promoting literacy, building homes for the poor (via Habitat for Humanity), and so on. These ideas are reflected in a bill that Senators John McCain and Evan Bayh have introduced. It calls for increasing AmeriCorps membership from roughly 50,000 to 250,000. No one can quarrel with the desirability of expanding all these services, but combining homeland protection with doing good will not work well. Americans are now agitated—and for some very good reasons—over the dangers they face from terrorists. They are anxious to do something to take part in protecting our nation from

such attacks. If the call to volunteer mixes routine service that has been going on for generations (however meritorious) with responses to the new emergencies, the motivational confusion is sure to dampen the willingness to come forward. It is as if the Red Cross, following a major disaster, were to call on people to donate blood *and* provide tourists with directions.

Several progressive Democrats favor increasing the benefits for those who serve in AmeriCorps. They are asking for larger stipends, bigger college benefits, and greater tax deductions for those who volunteer. Such magnified payoffs will increase the resources available to poor and disadvantaged youth who often are drawn to AmeriCorps as a way to pay for college. As worthy as such a goal is, it is hardly a reliable way to reinforce volunteerism and to cast into lasting forms the renewed spirit of patriotism.

#### A Different Path

The best way to proceed is to involve many more than the 20,000 volunteers that Bush is calling for (too few to do much of anything) and fewer than the millions sought by advocates of the draft. Volunteers at this juncture should only be asked to serve in matters that directly concern terrorism prevention.

Many could serve as part-timers and should not be compensated. These could include (after proper training) many thousands of new volunteer firefighters and emergency medical technicians, to be called upon in small and large emergencies. Others could give, say, an evening a week and two weekend days a month to help patrol the perimeters of strategic sites, from bridges to electric plants. They should act as eyes and ears of public authority, equipped with communications devices but not with arms. Others, who are ready and willing to serve full-time, could serve as organizers, which any volunteer effort lives and dies by, as well as take over some duties from the National Guard, INS, and other governmental agencies.

This is the time to invest our renewed patriotism in a form that has staying power: homeland protection service. But it is not the time to piggyback other good deeds on this project. The challenge we face to our security is grave enough to command all the new hands we can marshal.