

Remarks on the 20th Anniversary of AmeriCorps

September 12, 2014

Thank you so much. Thank you. Everybody, have a seat. Have a seat. Well, welcome to the White House. Give Ivan a big round of applause for the introduction. Dayna, thank you for sharing your story. And I want to thank all of you for joining President Clinton and me in celebrating this 20th anniversary of AmeriCorps.

I want to thank some strong supporters of national service who are here today. We've got Treasury Secretary Jack Lew, who as a young aide to President Clinton—I mean, they both still look good—[laughter]—but 20 years ago, helped to write the legislation creating AmeriCorps' 20 years—20-year legacy. So thank you, Jack, for the great job.

You already heard from Wendy Spencer, who is—she never runs out of energy and is reflective of the spirit of AmeriCorps—the CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service. Great job, Wendy.

My dear friend, former Senator Harris Wofford, who not only used to run CNCS, but also helped to create VISTA and the Peace Corps. I don't know anybody who's got a greater legacy of creating community and helping people to channel their civic virtues than Harris Wofford. We're so proud of him.

Carrie Hessler-Radelet, the new Director of the Peace Corps. Where's Carrie? There she is right there. We've got Congressman John Lewis, who didn't have an AmeriCorps program; just went out and got a whole lot done, which is why I'm standing here. David Price. Senator Martin Heinrich, the first AmeriCorps alum to be elected to the Senate. And everybody who's here who played a part in creating and sustaining AmeriCorps, both in the Clinton administration and the Bush administration and in Congress, and all the service leaders who mobilized and rallied over the years to keep AmeriCorps going. I thank all of you for living a life of active and energetic and engaged citizenship, because it has made America stronger. You have made America stronger because of what you've done.

Now, as President Clinton mentioned, not everybody who played an enormous role in this could be here today. Two people in particular who aren't, but who are in our hearts: Eli Segal, who did so much to get the Corporation for National and Community Service up and running two decades ago; and a man whose extraordinary achievements live on because he never stopped asking what he could do for his country, our dear friend Senator Ted Kennedy. His name is on the law that I signed 5 years ago expanding AmeriCorps—it was one of the last big public events that Teddy did—a law that's going to give a new generation of Americans more opportunities to give back to their communities and their country. And Teddy's wife Vicki as well as Eli's wife Phyllis are here today as well. We thank you so much for everything that you've done and for your support.

Now, as Wendy mentioned, all of you who are here are part of a national event. Since yesterday, 9/11 Day of Service, hundreds of thousands of Americans have taken part in service projects in all 50 States. Michelle and I spent a few hours helping out a school here in DC. Joe Biden volunteered down the street at George Washington University. Today thousands of Americans are taking the pledge as new AmeriCorps members. President George H.W. Bush is

swearing in volunteers in Maine. President George W. Bush and Laura Bush have filmed a video that's being shown across the country.

So it echoes back to that day in 1994, when President Clinton swore in that first class of AmeriCorps members right here at the White House. And some of the people who are here were in that class, and if you were, you might remember him saying that you were starting a journey that would change your lives forever, that AmeriCorps would change the life of the Nation, that it would give new life to the values that bind us together as Americans.

And that was a bold claim. But Bill Clinton is an optimist. [*Laughter*] And he knew from his own life, as I know from mine, what service can do: the sense of common purpose that it cultivates; the opportunity to join our fellow Americans to work together for something other than just ourselves, for something bigger, for the common good. And so he had high hopes on that bright September day. And he was not the only one.

William Consuegra took the AmeriCorps pledge that day. Then he went to work for Youth Harvest in Texas, helping high school students improve their literacy skills. Twenty years later, he's still a public servant, helping communities in New Mexico with community development.

Matthew Little took the pledge that day. He went to work for City Year in Boston. There, he says, he discovered a new source of inspiration: "Students who came to me with F's and left my homework club with A's." And he's been an educator ever since.

Sondra Samuels took that pledge that day. She headed to Philadelphia to join the Weed and Seed Initiative, helping communities reduce violent crime and gang activity. And she says that AmeriCorps taught her "that I can look at my country and [I can] actually make it different, not just wish it were different."

In Chicago, a bright, eager young woman shared in the hope of that day too. She had recently left her job at a law firm, became the founding executive director of Public Allies in Chicago, a nonprofit that trains young people for careers in public service. And soon after, Public Allies received one of the very first grants that AmeriCorps ever awarded. And that young woman happens to live with me. [*Laughter*] Her name is Michelle Obama. So the Obama household was on board with AmeriCorps from the start.

And for those of you who know my story starting off as a community organizer, I would not be standing here if it were not for service to others and the purpose that service gave my own life. Now, I moved to Chicago to become a community organizer in part—in parts of that town where steel plants had closed down and hope had dried up. And I wasn't sure what I was doing. I wasn't sure that I'd be successful. I was working with a group of churches out there, and we didn't have a lot of funding. And I think my starting salary was \$13,000 a year and gas expenses.

But what I found was that with patience and dedicated effort, I could make a difference. It wasn't always 100 percent of what I wanted; sometimes, it was just 20 percent, sometimes, it was just 50 percent. But it turned out that you could nudge history forward. You could shape it. You could see the lives of people that you cared about improving because of this blood and sweat and tears you were putting into it.

And then I found a community for myself, and I began to understand what citizenship meant: not just some abstraction, not just words on a page, not just rights and privileges, but duties and responsibilities. And it gave me a sense of direction about how I wanted to live my life.

So as it turned out, the idea of making a difference in other people's lives made a difference in mine. It made me whole. It gave me center. It gave me a compass. And that, when I look out on all these young people, Bill, is what's going to happen to them. Most of them are probably already a lot more sophisticated than I was at that time. *[Laughter]* And probably more gifted and more talented. But that's why when I look out, I can't describe how inspired I am, because in each of you I see unfurling all the incredible, wonderful things that you're going to be doing in your lives.

Twenty years after President Clinton signed and swore in that first AmeriCorps class, more than 900,000 Americans have learned the same lesson that I learned by serving through AmeriCorps. And they come from all walks of life: small towns, big cities, all backgrounds, all age groups. They've done everything from deliver emergency relief in the aftermath of disasters to staffing health clinics to—in underserved communities, to helping veterans find jobs. They've touched millions of lives. They've helped America become stronger and more resilient and more united.

So, Bill, you were right. AmeriCorps has changed the life of our Nation. And now it's up to us to make sure it continues. Because we're not just here to celebrate what's already been achieved, we're here to rededicate ourselves to the work that lies ahead. And the world—we're here to get things done. *[Applause]* We are here to get things done.

My administration has been determined to build on the foundation that President Bush and both—President Clinton and both Presidents Bush laid. We are determined to help AmeriCorps succeed. We've seen the outcomes that AmeriCorps members produce: improved literacy in the schools where they work. So if we're smart, Congress will fund this calling that's meant so much to so many and keep AmeriCorps strong.

And we'll keep doing our part. That's why I created a task force on national service last year: to find new ways to expand and improve national service. We've tested innovations. We're creating new models of partnership. We've reached out to the public—to the private sector. So AmeriCorps is as effective today as it's ever been.

We've created new AmeriCorps programs to address specific needs. For example, FEMA Corps trains and deploys national service members to help communities recover from disasters like hurricanes and tornadoes. School Turnaround AmeriCorps sends talented individuals into underachieving schools. The new Justice AmeriCorps will pair AmeriCorps members who are lawyers and paralegals with unaccompanied immigrant children to get them legal help. STEM AmeriCorps is mobilizing scientists and engineers to inspire young people to discover and tinker and innovate and make things.

And we've brought businesses and nonprofits on board. So we've seen again and again how national service helps people—young people gain valuable skills and training, and employers have noticed. So we want to do more to help talented national service members find good jobs after they wrap up their service. And that's the idea behind an initiative we're announcing today called Employers of National Service. If you are an employer—*[applause]*—if you're an employer who wants to hire talented, dedicated, patriotic, skilled, tireless, energetic workers, look to AmeriCorps, look to the Peace Corps.

And organizations like the Disney Company and American Red Cross and City of Nashville, United Way, others are already signing up. They know what we know: Citizens who perform national service are special. You want them on your team.

As of a few minutes ago, that includes our newest members, AmeriCorps class of 2014. So you've got Catherine Stodola who just took the pledge. She's helping homeless veterans find housing through Habitat for Humanity here in Washington. You've got Jay Savoy who took the pledge. And through City Year, she's going to be—[*applause*]*—*she's leading a team of tutors for kids like herself in her old neighborhood in Southeast DC. Ivan, who you just heard from, took the pledge and is mentoring young people through Public Allies in Maryland.

Seventy-five thousand members of this year's AmeriCorps class will spread out across the country, and they are doing their part to help make America safer and healthier and more fair and more just. Because like all those who serve their country through AmeriCorps, they don't just believe in, but live out a fundamental truth, and that is that people who love their country can change it.

That is the genius of America. That is the promise of AmeriCorps. It's one of the reasons I am so committed to this program and why I'm so hopeful about the future. We are proud of you. That goes for all the AmeriCorps members over the years. And I'll always be proud to serve a country where there are such striving, dreaming citizens like all of you. Congratulations.

God bless you, and God bless America. Thank you, President Clinton.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:48 a.m. on the South Lawn at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Ivan Marchena, Public Allies volunteer, AmeriCorps; AmeriCorps alumna Dayna Long, pediatrician, Children's Hospital Oakland in Oakland, CA, who introduced former President William J. Clinton; and Phyllis Nichamoff Segal, wife of the late Eli Segal, former Chief Executive Officer of the Corporation for National and Community Service.

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Names: Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Bush, George H.W.; Bush, George W.; Bush, Laura; Clinton, William J.; Consuegra, William; Heinrich, Martin T.; Hessler-Radelet, Carolyn; Kennedy, Victoria Reggie; Lew, Jacob J.; Lewis, John R.; Little, Matthew; Long, Dayna; Marchena, Ivan; Obama, Michelle; Price, David E.; Samuels, Sondra; Savoy, Jay; Segal, Phyllis Nichamoff; Spencer, Wendy; Stodola, Catherine; Wofford, Harris L.

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