

Remarks in a Swearing-In Ceremony for AmeriCorps Volunteers *September 12, 1994*

The President. Good afternoon. In just a moment, I'll speak to thousands of you young people and those of you who are young in spirit around the country about our national service program, AmeriCorps. But before I do, let me say just a few words about what occurred here this morning.

As you know, a plane came down here early this morning, and the pilot lost his life. An investigation is taking place that will determine how and why this happened. We take this incident seriously because the White House is the people's house. And it is the job of every President who lives here to keep it safe and secure.

On his second night in the White House, our second President, John Adams, wrote: "I pray heaven to bestow the best blessings on this house and on all that shall hereafter inhabit it." That prayer has been answered. In times of war and peace, in hard times and good, the White House is an enduring symbol of our democracy. It tells our people and those around the world that the mission of America continues, as it does on this happy and important day. So let me assure all Americans, the people's house will be kept safe, it will be kept open, and the people's business will go on.

We stand at the start of America's new season of service. For 20,000 Americans this year all over our great land, this moment marks the beginning of a journey that will change their lives forever. For our Nation, the moments of service that will follow will change our lives for many seasons to come.

Service is never a simple act, it's about sacrifice for others and about accomplishment for ourselves, about reaching out, one person to another, about all our choices gathered together as a country to reach across all our divides. It's about you and me and all of us together, who we are as individuals and what we are as a nation.

Service is a spark to rekindle the spirit of democracy in an age of uncertainty. We hear a great deal about values now. I encourage America in that conversation. But all the lofty talk comes down to three simple questions: What is right? What is wrong? And what are we going to do about it?

Today we're doing what is right. Just look around you. You're what is right with America. Twenty thousand of you this year and 100,000 over the next 3 years will be getting things done in hundreds of places around the country. You will be saving babies in south Texas, walking the police beat in Brooklyn. You will work on boats to reclaim the Chesapeake Bay and work on new housing to rebuild parts of Roxbury. You will take seniors safely to the doctor in St. Louis and teach children in Sacramento to read.

Every generation in our history has learned to take responsibility for our future, and your generation is no exception. We look at you now, and we know you are no generation of slackers. Instead, you are a generation of doers. And you want to give something back to the country that has given so much to you. The only limit to our future is what we're willing to demand of ourselves today. Generations of Americans before us have done the groundwork. Now it falls to all of us to build on their foundations.

In just a minute, I'll lead nearly 20,000 AmeriCorps members gathered across America in a pledge. I ask all Americans to reflect on the words they will say, because with words like "action" and "commitment," "community" and "common ground," this is much more than a pledge of service. It's a creed for America as we move forward to renew our great country. And to all of you who will help to lead us in that journey, I say God bless you, and thank you from the bottom of my heart.

And now it's my great pleasure to swear in the first members of AmeriCorps around the Nation, including these fine young people who are here with me. Would you all raise your right hand and repeat after me:

I will get things done for America to make our people safer, smarter, and healthier. I will bring Americans together to strengthen our communities. Faced with apathy, I will take action. Faced with conflict, I will seek common ground. Faced with adversity, I will persevere. I will carry this commitment with me this year and beyond. I am an AmeriCorps member, and I am going to get things done.

[*The AmeriCorps volunteers repeated the pledge line by line after the President.*]

The President. Thank you, and good luck.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:46 p.m. by satellite from the Oval Office at the White House.

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The President. Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you, Mr. Vice President. Thank you, Eli Segal, for your wonderful work. This is a very, very happy day for Hillary and for me, especially, to see all of you here with all of your enthusiasm, your energy, your dreams.

There are so many things I would like to say, but before we go on, I feel that I ought to give you some explanation about what occurred here this morning and why we had to delay this event and move it to the front of the White House.

As you know, a plane came down here on the South Lawn, and a pilot lost his life. The investigation is now in place that will determine how and why this happened. We take this incident seriously because this house is the people's house. It's the job of every President to keep it safe and secure.

On his second night here, our second President and the first person to live in the White House, John Adams, wrote: "I pray heaven to bestow the best blessings on this house and on all that shall hereafter inhabit it." That prayer has been answered. In times of war and peace, in hard times, in good times, the White House has remained an enduring symbol of our democracy. It tells our people and all those around the world that the mission of America continues. And that is the message that you send out here today as well. So I pledge to you that we will continue that, and I'm sorry we had to move to the front, but maybe we ought to be in the front of the White House today for something this important.

This year 20,000 Americans, most of whom are young, some of whom are young in spirit and determined to serve and also go on to further their education, mark the beginning of a journey that will change their lives forever. It will also change the life of this Nation for many seasons to come.

This day is part of a long journey for me, personally, and for many others who have long harbored the dream that national service embodies. I want to say a special word of thanks to someone who worked with me through this whole process and who dreamed of national service even before I did, and that is Senator Harris Wofford of Pennsylvania. I thank you especially, sir, today. Like the Vice President's fine sister, Senator Wofford started out with the Peace Corps 30 years ago.

One of the main reasons I ran for President is that I felt that we as Americans needed to make our life's journeys together rather than apart. I felt that we not only needed to change our direction and make more progress but that we had to do it by coming together instead of drifting apart. Today we begin to fulfill that mission.

For many of us, this journey of service reaches back to life growing up in places we called home, back to our classrooms, our church basements, our backyards, with the American traditions of community and service. So for many of us, today is just one step on what has been a lifetime journey.

But what we do today and what we will do in the days and years ahead will give new life to the values that bind us as Americans. For service is about sacrifice for others and about accomplishment and fulfillment for ourselves, about reaching out, one person to another, about all of our choices gathered together as a country, to reach across all those things that divide us, about you and me individually and about all of us together, who we are as individuals and who we are as a nation.

Service is a spark to rekindle the spirit of democracy in an age of uncertainty. We hear a great deal today about values, and so we must. I encourage America in that conversation. But when it is all said and done, it comes down to three simple questions: What is right? What