

A New Era of Service
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University of Colorado, Colorado Springs
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(As prepared for delivery)

In two days, we will celebrate America's Independence Day. We'll come together with family and friends to enjoy a day off. Maybe you'll cook out, watch a parade or take in some fireworks. Hopefully, you'll get a break from things like politics.

But I'm sure there will be a moment or two, when the fireworks grow quiet or the parade has gone by, when the enormity of the American accomplishment will sink in, along with a deep pride in your place in the story of the United States America. I hope you take that moment to think about what you can do to shape the future of this country we love.

These days, it's easy for us to get caught thinking that there are two different stories at work in our lives. There is the story of our day-to-day cares and responsibilities – the classes you have to take or the bills you have to pay; the bustle and busyness of what happens in your own life. And then there is the story of what's happening in the wider world – a story seen in headlines and websites and televised images; a story experienced only through the price you pay at the pump or the extra screening you pass through at the airport.

This is the divide that separates you from the ability to shape your own destiny. So I am asking you – on this 4th of July – to reject that divide, to step into the strong currents of history, and to shape your country's future. Because your own story and the American story are not separate, they are shared. And they will both be enriched if together, we answer a new call to service to meet the challenges of our new century.

I say this to you as someone who couldn't be standing here today if not for the service of others, and who wouldn't be standing here if not for the purpose that service gave my own life.

You see, I spent much of my childhood adrift. My father left my mother and me when I was two. My mother remarried, and we lived in Indonesia for a time. But I was mostly raised in Hawaii by my mom and my grandparents from Kansas. Growing up, I wasn't always sure who I was, or where I was going.

But during my first two years of college, perhaps because the values my mother had taught me – hard work, honesty, empathy – had resurfaced after a long hibernation; or perhaps because of the example of wonderful teachers and lasting friends, I began to notice a world beyond myself. And by the time I graduated from college, I was possessed with a crazy idea – that I would work at a grassroots level to bring about change.

I wrote letters to every organization in the country I could think of. And one day, a small group of churches on the South Side of Chicago offered me a job working to help

neighborhoods that had been devastated by steel plant closings. My mother and grandparents wanted me to go to law school. My friends were applying to jobs on Wall Street. Meanwhile, this organization offered me \$12,000 a year plus \$2,000 for an old, beat-up car. And I said yes.

I didn't know a soul in Chicago, and I wasn't sure what was waiting for me there. I had always been inspired by stories of the Civil Rights movement and JFK's call to service, but when I got to the South Side, there were no marches, and no soaring speeches. In the shadow of an empty steel plant, there were just a lot of folks who were struggling.

I still remember one of the very first meetings we put together to discuss gang violence with a group of community leaders. We waited and waited for people to show up, and finally, a group of older people walked into the hall. And they sat down. And a little old lady raised her hand and asked, "Is this where the bingo game is?"

It wasn't easy, but eventually, we made progress. Day by day, block by block, we brought the community together. We registered new voters. We set up after school programs, fought for new jobs, and helped people live lives with more opportunity, and some measure of dignity.

But I also began to realize that I wasn't just helping other people. Through service, I found a community that embraced me; citizenship that was meaningful; the direction I'd been seeking. Through service, I discovered how my own improbable story fit into the larger story of America.

There is a lesson to be learned from generations who have served – from soldiers and sailors; airmen and Marines; suffragists and freedom riders; teachers and doctors; cops and firefighters. It's the lesson that in America, each of us is free to seek our own dreams, but we must also serve a common purpose, a higher purpose. When you choose to serve – whether it's your nation, your community, or simply your neighbor – you are connected to that fundamental American ideal that we want Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness not just for ourselves, but for all Americans. That is why this is a great nation. Because time and again, Americans have been willing to serve on stages both great and small; to draw on the same spirit that launched America's improbable journey to meet the challenges of each defining moment in our history.

One of those moments came on September 11, 2001. Whether you lived in Manhattan or thousands of miles away in Colorado, you felt the pain and loss of that day not just as an individual, but as an American. You also felt pride – pride in the firefighters who rushed up the stairs while workers rushed down; pride in the police who provided comfort, and the neighbors who lent a hand; pride in your citizenship, and the tattered flag that flew at Ground Zero. That's why Americans lined up to give blood. That's why we held vigils and flew flags. That's why we rallied behind our President. We were ready to step into the strong current of history, and to answer a new call for our country. But the call never came.

Instead of a call to service, we were asked to go shopping. Instead of a call for shared sacrifice, we gave tax cuts to the wealthiest Americans in a time of war for the very first time in our history. Instead of leadership that called us to come together, we got patriotism defined as the property of one party, and used as a political wedge to take us into a war that should have never been authorized and never been waged.

We have lost precious time. Our nation is less secure and less respected in the world. Our energy dependence has risen, and so has the specter of climate change. More of our children have been left behind, and our American Dream risks slipping away. The burden of service has fallen on to the backs of our military – and their families – who have endured tour after tour of duty bravely and brilliantly, even though they haven't always gotten the care and support they have earned.

When I was thinking about whether or not to seek the presidency, there were voices that counseled me to wait. Why not stay in Washington for a few more years, they said, to master the game. But the fact is, I had been in Washington long enough to know that it needs to change.

I am running for President, right now, because of what Dr. King called the fierce urgency of now. This moment is too important to sit on the sidelines. Our country faces determined enemies abroad, and definitive challenges at home. But I have no doubt that in the face of these odds, people who love their country can change it. That is why I am running for President. That is why I'm determined to reach out – not just to Democrats, but to Independents and Republicans who want to move in a new direction. And that is why I won't just ask for your vote as a candidate – I will ask for your service and your active citizenship when I am President of the United States.

This will not be a call issued in one speech or one program – this will be a central cause of my presidency. We will ask Americans to serve. We will create new opportunities for Americans to serve. And we will direct that service to our most pressing national challenges.

There is no challenge greater than the defense of our nation and our values. The men and women of our military – from Fort Carson to Peterson Air Force base, from the Air Force Academy to the ROTC students here on campus – have signed up at a time when our troops face an ever-increasing load. Fighting a resurgent Taliban. Targeting al Qaeda. Persevering in the deserts and cities of Iraq. Training foreign militaries. Delivering humanitarian relief. In this young century, our military has answered when called, even as that call has come too often. Through their commitment, their capability, and their courage they have done us all proud.

But we need to ease the burden on our troops, while meeting the challenges of the 21st century. That's why I will call on a new generation of Americans to join our military, and complete the effort to increase our ground forces by 65,000 soldiers and 27,000 Marines.

A call to service must be backed by a sacred trust with anyone who puts on the uniform of the United States. A young person joining our military must know that we'll only send them into harm's way when we absolutely must. That we'll provide them with the equipment needed to complete their mission safely, and deployments that allow adequate time back home. They must see that we'll care for our military families while they're deployed, and that we're providing our veterans with the support, benefits, and opportunity that they have earned when they return home. That's what I've fought for on the Senate Veteran's Affairs Committee. That's what I'll promise as Commander in Chief.

Just as we must value and encourage military service across our society, we must honor and expand other opportunities to serve. Because the future of our nation depends on the soldier at Fort Carson, but it also depends on the teacher in East LA, the nurse in Appalachia, the after-school worker in New Orleans, the Peace Corps volunteer in Africa, and the Foreign Service officer in Indonesia. Americans have shown that they want to step up. But we're not keeping pace with the demand of those who want to serve, or leveraging that commitment to meet national challenges. FDR not only enlisted Americans to create employment, he targeted that service to build our infrastructure and conserve our environment. JFK not only called on a new generation, he made their service a bridge to the developing world, and a bright light of American values in the darkest days of the Cold War.

Today, AmeriCorps – our nation's network of local, state and national service programs – has 75,000 slots. I know firsthand the quality of these programs. My wife Michelle once left her job at a law firm to be the founding director of an AmeriCorps program in Chicago that trains young people for careers in public service. These programs invest Americans in their communities and their country. They tap America's greatest resource – our citizens.

As President, I will expand AmeriCorps to 250,000 slots, and make that increased service a vehicle to meet national goals like providing health care and education, saving our planet and restoring our standing in the world, so that citizens see their efforts connected to a common purpose. People of all ages, stations, and skills will be asked to serve. Because when it comes to the challenges we face, the American people are not the problem – they are the answer.

We'll send more college graduates to teach and mentor our young people. We'll call on Americans to join an Energy Corps to conduct renewable energy and environmental cleanup projects in their neighborhoods. We'll enlist veterans to help other vets find jobs and support, and to be there for our military families. And we'll also grow our Foreign Service, open consulates that have been shuttered, and double the size of the Peace Corps by 2011 to renew our diplomacy.

And we'll use technology to connect people to service. We'll expand USA Freedom Corps to create an online network where Americans can browse opportunities to volunteer. You'll be able to search by category, time commitment, and skill sets; you'll be able to rate service opportunities, build service networks, and create your own service

pages to track your hours and activities. This will empower more Americans to craft their own service agenda, and make their own change from the bottom up.

We also need to invest in ideas that can help us meet our common challenges, because more often than not, the next great social innovation won't be generated by the government.

The non-profit sector employs 1 in 12 Americans and 115 nonprofits are launched every day. Yet while the federal government invests \$7 billion in research and development for the private sector, there is no similar effort to support non-profit innovation. Meanwhile, there are ideas across America – in our inner cities and small towns; from college graduates, to seniors getting ready to retire – that could benefit millions of Americans if they're given the chance to grow.

As President, I will launch a new Social Investment Fund Network. It's time to get the grass roots, the foundations, the faith-based organizations, the private sector and the government at the table so that we can learn from our own success stories. We'll invest in ideas that work; leverage private sector dollars to encourage innovation; and expand successful programs to scale. Take a program like the Harlem Children's Zone, which helps thousands of kids in New York through after-school activities, mentoring, and family support. We need to make that model work in different cities across America. And just as we support small businesses, I'll start a new Social Entrepreneur Agency to make sure that small non-profits have strong support from Washington.

Finally, we need to integrate service into education, so that young Americans are called upon and prepared to be active citizens.

Just as we teach math and writing, arts and athletics, we need to teach young Americans to take citizenship seriously. Study after study shows that students who serve do better in school, are more likely to go to college, and more likely to maintain that service as adults. So when I'm President, I will set a goal for all American middle and high school students to perform 50 hours of service a year, and for all college students to perform 100 hours of service a year. This means that by the time you graduate college, you'll have done 17 weeks of service.

We'll reach this goal in several ways. At the middle and high school level, we'll make federal assistance conditional on school districts developing service programs, and give schools resources to offer new service opportunities. At the community level, we'll develop public-private partnerships so students can serve more outside the classroom.

For college students, I have proposed an annual American Opportunity Tax Credit of \$4,000. To receive this credit, we'll require 100 hours of public service. You invest in America, and America invests in you – that's how we're going to make sure that college is affordable for every single American, while preparing our nation to compete in the 21st century.

For our veterans, I was proud to be a strong and early supporter of Jim Webb's bipartisan GI Bill, so that today's vets have the same opportunity that my grandfather had under the GI Bill. To marshal their talents in building a new energy economy, I will launch an initiative to give our veterans the training they need to succeed in the Green Jobs of the future. It's time to end our energy dependence at home so our national security isn't held hostage to oil and gas from abroad.

And we will not leave out the nearly 2 million young Americans who are out of school and out of work. We'll enlist them in our Energy Corps, so that disadvantaged young people can find useful work, clean polluted areas, help weatherize homes, and gain skills in a growing industry. And we'll expand the YouthBuild Program, which puts young Americans to work building affordable housing in America's poorest communities, giving them valuable skills and a chance to complete a high school education. Because no one should be left out of the American story.

Now I know what the cynics will say. I've heard from them all my life.

These are the voices that will tell you – not just what you can't do – but what you won't do. Americans won't come together – our allegiance doesn't go beyond our political party, region, or congregation. Young Americans won't serve their country – they're too selfish, or too lazy. This is the soft sell of the status quo, the voice that tells you to settle because settling isn't that bad.

That's not the America that I've seen throughout this campaign. I've seen young people work, and volunteer, and turn out in record numbers. I've met members of our military – like the thousands of soldiers and airmen here in Colorado Springs – who signed up to serve in the wake of 9/11. I've met community workers who want to care for our kids; students who want to end the genocide in Darfur; businesses that want to expand opportunity; farmers who want to help free us from the tyranny of oil; seniors searching for ways to give back; and people of every age, race, and religion who want to come together to renew the American spirit.

Renewing that spirit starts with service. Make no mistake: our destiny as Americans is tied up with one another. If we are less respected in the world, then you will be less safe. If we keep paying dictators for foreign oil, gas prices are going to keep rising, and so are the oceans. If we can't give all of our kids a world-class education, then our economy is going to fall behind.

And that's how it should be. That's the bet our Founding Fathers were making all of those years ago – that our individual destinies could be tied together in the common destiny of democracy; that government depends not just on the consent of the governed, but on the service of citizens. That's what history calls us to do. Because loving your country shouldn't just mean watching fireworks on the 4th of July. Loving your country must mean accepting your responsibility to do your part to change it. If you do, your life will be richer, and our country will be stronger.

We need your service, right now, at this moment – our moment – in history. I'm not going to tell you what your role should be; that's for you to discover. But I am going to ask you to play your

part; ask you to stand up; ask you to put your foot firmly into the current of history. I am asking you to change history's course. And if I have the fortune to be your President, decades from now – when the memory of this or that policy has faded, and when the words that we will speak in the next few years are long forgotten – I hope you remember this as a moment when your own story and the American story came together, and – in the words of Dr. King – the arch of history bent once more towards justice.