by William C. Kashatus

n an inaugural address that has become a poignant reminder of the idealism of the mid-twentieth century, President John F. Kennedy challenged Americans to "ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." By throwing down the gauntlet, he inspired a strong sense of national purpose and pride among the American people. His New Frontier programs ushered in a refreshing spirit of voluntarism by urging citizens to commit themselves to solving the problems of poverty and social injustice, both at home and abroad.

President Kennedy's agenda proved both ambitious and energizing. He advocated such liberal programs as a higher minimum wage, the creation of new jobs, greater federal aid to education, increased Social Security benefits, and support for public housing. In foreign policy he sought to contain the Communist threat by supporting democratic movements in Third World nations and,

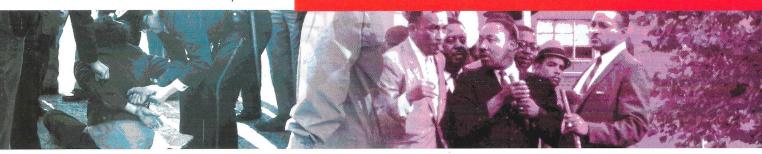
Wofford, who had served as counsel to the Reverend Theodore Hesburgh of Notre Dame University on the first U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 1958-1959, was tapped by Kennedy to become Special Assistant to the President and chair of his sub-cabinet group on civil rights. Wofford's friendship with the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as well as his participation in the civil rights movement, enabled Kennedy to realize many notable gains, including the increased appointment of blacks to federal posts, legally ending racial discrimination in federally built housing, and insuring the integration of national universities, as well

presidency of Bryn Mawr College, from 1970 to 1978, he created and chaired the Committee to Study the Idea of National Service which, in 1979, issued the landmark report, Youth and the Needs of the Nation. In 1987, as Pennsylvania's Secretary of Labor and Industry, Wofford established and directed Governor Robert P. Casey's Office of Citizen Service which promoted school-based service learning throughout the Commonwealth, managed the Pennsylvania Conservation Corps, and encouraged the formation of many summer and year-round youth service corps.

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From The Pea

An Interview with Harris



ultimately, through efforts to ease U.S.-Soviet tensions. To achieve those measures, he surrounded himself with talented and visionary aides and advisors who brought a tremendous wealth of experience, intellect, and vigor to their duties. Among those individuals, who have become known to history as "the best and the brightest," was Harris Wofford.

Born on April 9, 1926, in New York, Harris Llewellyn Wofford Jr. received his bachelor's degree in 1948 from the University of Chicago, and a bachelor of law degree from Yale University in 1954, the same year he received his juris doctor degree from Howard University Law School. He is the author of several books, including Of Kennedys and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties, and a number of articles and essays on politics, education, and law.

as black voter registration, in the South.

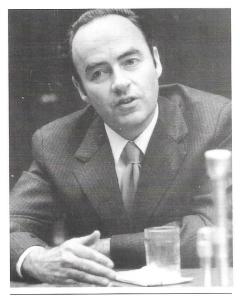
While on the White House staff, Wofford helped organize the Peace Corps, an agency that dispatched skilled volunteers overseas to assist people of underdeveloped countries. One of the bestpublicized of Kennedy's New Frontier initiatives, the Peace Corps provided technical and educational assistance in establishing health care programs and improving agricultural efficiency. From 1962 to 1965, Wofford, acting as an associate director, molded the Peace Corps into a constructive force for change and a vehicle for young volunteers that reflected Kennedy's promise to direct the idealism of a new and hopeful generation.

Since helping to launch the Peace Corps in 1961, Wofford has been a torchbearer for service on state, national, and international levels. During his was appointed to the U.S. Senate on May 8, 1991, by Governor Casey to serve the remainder of the term. Wofford served in the senate until January 3, 1995. Wofford played a critical role in drafting and securing bipartisan support for a National Civilian Community Corps, signed into law by President George Bush in 1992 and the National and Community

President John F. Kennedy's challenge to Americans inspired many young people to volunteer for the Peace Corps (above, right) to help improve the lives of people around the world, even as domestic struggles in civil rights continued (above, left). Leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (center, second from left) spoke out for equality as he did during this visit to Philadelphia's Raymond Rosen Apartments.

Service Trust Act of 1993, signed into law by President William Jefferson Clinton.

From the autumn of 1995 until January 20, 2001, Wofford served as chief executive officer of the Corporation for National Service, the parent body of AmeriCorps. A private/public partnership, AmeriCorps is based in the non-profit sector and has been likened to a domestic Peace Corps. The agency counts more than twenty-five thousand volunteers who serve with four hundred community-based sponsors. In addition to recruiting and training thousands of new volunteers, AmeriCorps members patrol streets and recreation centers; tutor and mentor at-risk



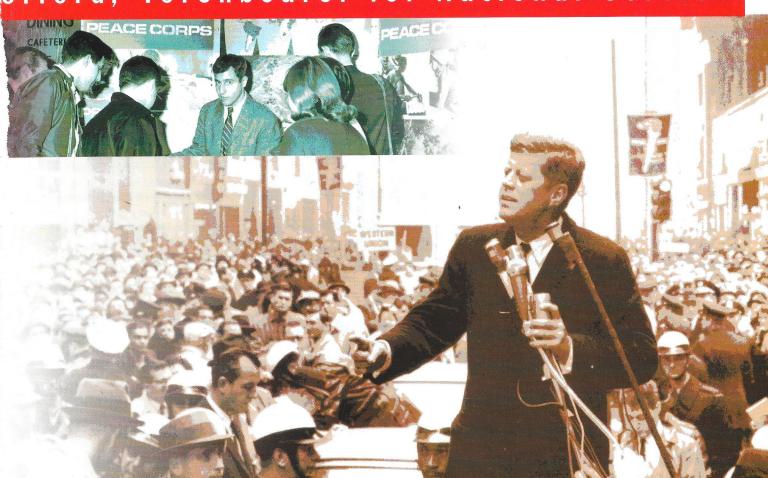
Harris Llewellyn Wofford in 1970.

youth; organize neighborhood watch organizations; assist crime victims; build affordable housing; help seniors live independently; immunize children; restore national and state parks; and provide emergency and long-term assistance to victims of natural disasters.

In this interview, conducted in 1997, Harris Wofford discusses his career in public service, his association with national leaders, among them Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and his tireless efforts to promote voluntarism among a new generation of Americans.

e Corps To Americorps

offord, Torchbearer for National Service



do is to redefine service and voluntarism to mean constructive change

Was there a specific event or experience that inspired your commitment to more than a half-century of service?

The key question is what you mean by the word "service." When I was in high school, I propelled myself into organizing the Student Federalists for a World Union of Democracies to fight Adolph Hitler and to be a nucleus of a world union afterwards. That local high school organization grew into a national student organization that became a debate society. I don't know if you call that service, as much as following ideas. I do think, however, that I started at an early age to fall in love with ideas and follow them. I fell in love, for example, with the founding fathers and the great presidents like Washington, Jefferson and, especially, Lincoln. Their words and actions inspired me. Their pictures were all over my walls.

As a young adult just out of college, the idea of civil rights fascinated me. I became interested in it thanks to Mohandas Gandhi and my travels in India. I was challenged by the questions of the Indians who asked, "What are you doing about segregation in the United States?" and "Why haven't you gone to jail

against segregation?"

I wouldn't put service as the category within which I see myself fitting, as much as following ideas. The term service sounds a little too pious to me and service really isn't limited to piety. Those who volunteer their time have all kinds of motives to do service. I am reminded, for example, of one of the first Peace Corps volunteers who, when asked why he joined, replied, "Before John Kennedy became President, no one had ever asked me

Demonstrations against social injustice broke out throughout the country; in 1965, a sit-in at a federal building in Philadelphia protestested the treatment of Blacks in Selma, Alabama. A demonstrator remains where he was dumped off a stretcher as federal marshals removed thirty other demonstrators.

to do anything patriotic, unselfish, or for the common good. Kennedy asked." There wasn't really anything pious about his reasons for doing service.

Peace Corps volunteers were engaged in service for many reasons. Some wanted adventure, some wanted to get away, some wanted to contribute to something larger than themselves. They were healthy, young people with mixed motives. Only a minority had what you might call purely altruistic intentions in volunteering.

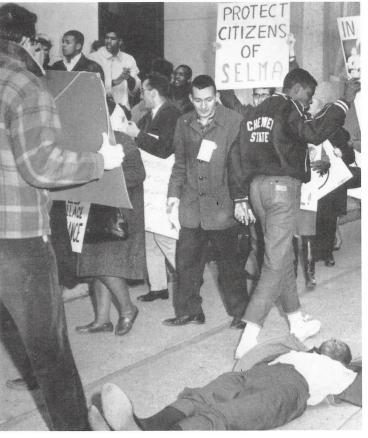
Having spent an entire lifetime organizing service, I can tell you that the terms service and volunteerism are part of the problem. They're lovely words which suggest nice things, but they don't carry the same significance as activism or constructive change. That is why Americans are skeptical of making a greater commitment in this area—they cannot see the connection between service and substantive political, social and economic change. If we hope to change that kind of apathy, one of the things we have to do is to redefine service and voluntarism to mean constructive change.

You have spoken of your high regard for Mohandas Gandhi and your travels to India with your late wife, Clare, in 1948. Did Gandhi inspire your interest in nonviolent civil disobedience?

It really wasn't non-violence that initially interested me about Gandhi. I was an Army Air Force volunteer with no special interest in non-violence. In fact, I think the pacifist side of Gandhi has been greatly overstated. He wanted to fight injustice and felt that non-violent direct action was simply the best way to do it without producing negative results. Rather it was the idea of self-government, or the duty of a people to rule themselves, that led me to Gandhi. What impressed me most was his call to the Indian people in their movement to expel the British from their country.

The fruit of your travels was the 1950 book, *India Afire*, which you wrote with your late wife, Clare. Didn't you propose in your book that the American civil rights movement should adopt nonviolent direct action?

About the same time that I was in India, in the late 1940s, Dr. Martin Luther King heard Mordecai Johnson, the president of Howard University, deliver a series of passionate lectures on Gandhi and decided to read all he could find on the Indian leader. It isn't that I planted Gandhi in his head; it was more that we had Gandhi in common when he started the Montgomery bus boycott. In fact, in 1955, shortly after I delivered a speech at the Hampton Institute on why American Negroes should use Gandhian techniques, I received letters from a number of black leaders who disagreed with me. One was from Thurgood Marshall who was concerned that I was undermining the civil rights effort to act in accordance with the law. He felt that my asking





An exhibit of African crafts provides a visual aid as Lincoln University professor Harold D. Gunn (right) instructs the school's Peace Corps trainees preparing in 1963 to leave for Liberia.

blacks to disobey the law would totally confuse the efforts of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] to make Southern whites obey the law whether or not they agreed with it.

In 1960 you served as a key aide to Senator John F. Kennedy in his presidential campaign and later accepted a post in his administration as Special Assistant to the President and chair of sub-cabinet group on civil rights. At the time you were referred to as a "burr in the britches" of President Kennedy and his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, prodding them to bring the power and the prestige of the presidency to bear on the side of civil rights. Is that accurate?

I don't think "burr in the britches" is quite accurate. I'm not a purist in politics. Politics has to be the art of the possible. On some of the major decisions in civil rights, Kennedy certainly did let the movement down. But in most cases, I thought he was correct to act in the way he did.

For example, the decision not to go forward on civil rights legislation in the first year of his administration, he made in spite of a platform that contained the strongest statement on civil rights in the history of the Democratic Party. Kennedy and the great majority of Democratic senators made a solemn commitment to civil rights during the special session in August of 1960. The

Republicans were trying to embarrass us, believing that the issue would inevitably tear our party apart with all of its southern senators. Kennedy asked me to secure a pledge from almost every Democratic senator outside of the South to move forward on civil rights during the first hundred days of his administration. But after that was achieved and we looked at the issue in a cold light winning the election by only one hundred thousand votes, barely having a working majority in Congress, the Southerners controlling the committees, the threat of a filibuster in the Senatewe knew that if we did go forward we would be risking our influence on Capitol Hill. A filibuster in the senate, for example, would only divide the Democratic Party and diminish all the prospects for any other initiative the administration took. Under those circumstances, I agreed with Kennedy that we couldn't go forward on civil rights.

Instead, I helped to shape another alternative for strong executive action: to employ, in an unprecedented way, blacks in federal positions; to reshape the policies of all federal agencies in a way that would press for integration; to direct the Justice Department to proceed with school integration cases on a much more vigorous basis than it had in the past; and to use unprecedented federal power in achieving voter registration in the South. I took a lot of heat by going out and defending those policies during the 1960s. Perhaps that is why the current

me as a hero who is constantly prodding the Kennedy brothers to move forward on this issue.

There was one area where I thought the Kennedys made a mistake and they knew it. During my tenure on the Civil Rights Commission in the late 1950s, I had helped to draft the executive order putting an end to discrimination in federal housing. I had organized the hearings on that issue and it was a special interest of mine. Kennedy knew it. During the 1960 presidential campaign he had hired me to be a speechwriter on Asia, Africa, and Latin America. But when he realized he was in trouble with the Negro vote for a variety of reasons, he asked for my counsel on civil rights—and he was very pointed about it. "What are the ten things I need to do as president to clear up this issue of civil rights?" he asked. One of the things I urged was strong executive action. I reminded him of my work as counsel for the Civil Rights Commission on housing discrimination and the executive action we recommended to President Eisenhower, as well as my disappointment with the fact that the measure sat on Ike's desk for a year. I told Kennedy that "with one stroke of a pen" you can sign an executive order like that and it would demonstrate your personal commitment to this area. "That's it!" he responded, "one stroke of a pen—that's what a president can do."

Later, in the first presidential debate with Richard Nixon, Kennedy promised that "with one stroke of a pen" he would sign an executive order to end discrimination in federal housing. Then, three months into his administration, just as he was about to sign the order, all the southern representatives and senators warned him that such a measure would destroy the Democrats in the next congressional election. Kennedy called me in and tried to convince me of the need for a delay on the measure. Of course, he never did sign it and I thought that was a mistake. In fact, civil rights leaders started a campaign of sending pens to the White House, with a note reminding the president that he could end discrimination "with one stroke of a pen!" When the first batch of them arrived, Kennedy, clearly frustrated, but not to the point of losing his wonderful sense of humor, told his aides to "send the damn pens to Wofford!" During the next few weeks, those pens

There were still other occasions when I was simply caught in the middle. Being

certainly did pile up in my office.

rights, Kennedy knew very well my thoughts on this issue. In some respects, that had a negative effect in that I became a buffer for him. When civil rights leaders would come and so passionately tell me their criticism of the administration, they expected me to convey their feelings to the president. But since he already knew what I thought, it didn't have the same kind of impact as if they told him themselves. So when I went off to the Peace Corps in the summer of 1962 at Sargent Shriver's tempting behest, I told Martin Luther King that my leaving would be for the best since he would have to communicate directly with the president. And, in fact, Kennedy's best encounters came, in civil rights, when he dealt directly with King or Roy Wilkins of the NAACP as well as other black leaders.

How did President Kennedy react to sensitive issues in the civil rights movement?

During the first session of the Peace Corps advisory counsel at the White House, a number of black leaders, including Harry Belafonte and Benjamin Mays, pressed me to tell the president that he had not given the kind of moral

leadership to the Freedom Riders that the movement needed. While he spoke out against the violence they experienced, he did not speak forcefully for the integration of bussing. I urged them not to count on me to tell him their feelings, but rather to tell him themselves. When the president entered the cabinet room he spoke with all of them, and they expressed their thanks for all he had done for civil rights. But not one of those leaders raised the concern on bussing.

Now I know that they had great respect for the office of the president and that an advisory counsel meeting on the Peace Corps

One of the many offices Wofford has held during a long and distinguished career in politics, public service, and academia was president of Bryn Mawr College, from 1970 to 1978.

forum in which to raise the issue of civil

rights, but Kennedy did linger for some time afterwards. Having noticed that no one was willing or able to raise the concern, I finally addressed it with him. Kennedy then approached Belafonte and Mays and asked for their feelings about the issue. They were very low key about it, as if the integration of bussing was a minor concern. I was so angry with them afterwards. "You had an opportunity," I said to them, "why didn't you capitalize on it? You'll always express your true feelings to me, but you won't tell the president who can actually do something about it!" At that point a guard informed me that the president wanted to see me in the Oval office immediately. When I got there he was really angry. "What do they think I should do?" he exploded. "I've been doing more for civil rights than any other president in American history. More than all of them wrapped together! What do they want me to do?"

I told him that the issue involved more than just law and order—that these leaders wanted him to say something on the substance of ending segregation. "Of course I'm for ending segregation in bus transportation!" he exclaimed. "Of course, I'd say that!" To which I

Within five minutes we drafted a strong statement and he got it out. That statement resolved that within a year, the Justice Department would investigate and introduce litigation that would end segregation in interstate transportation. A year after that, the Freedom Riders tested the measure and it held up. So, in the end, Kennedy did act when confronted directly on a particular issue.

What is your assessment of the civil rights movement today?

I honestly don't know if you could actually say that there is a civil rights movement today. There was a movement before King, led by the NAACP in particular. There was a larger, more powerful movement with King. But now I don't know if we can say that there is a movement today. I find it difficult to believe that in today's colleges and universities, for example, African American students are, of their own free will, choosing segregation. Martin Luther King and Roy Wilkins would be turning over in their graves if they knew that. While I understand that there are many complex reasons for their selfsegregation, I think that it is a tragedy.

I believe that it is very important, as a matter of truth in history, that young

people learn that during the decade of civil disobedience—that "season of suffering" as Martin Luther King called it—two great goals were achieved: the right to vote throughout the South and the legal ending of public segregation. More important, there was no backsliding on either achievement.

What are your recollections of helping to establish the Peace Corps?

The sixties were an extraordinary time of social invention and constructive politics, an era of unprecedented convergence of popular initiative and public power. The early part of that decade, in particular, saw a surge in the spirit of national service, with people in surprising numbers really interested in what they could do for their country. The Peace Corps came about because of that

kind of spirit. In fact, shortly after the inauguration, the Kennedy administration received more letters from people offering to work in, or volunteer for, the Peace Corps even than for all of the existing programs of the United States government put together!

Because of my role in civil rights I wasn't sure just how involved I would be in the actual planning of the Peace Corps. About a week after the inauguration, after I had already agreed to help Sargent Shriver organize the Peace Corps, I was summoned to the Oval Office. "What's this about your going to the Peace Corps?" the president asked. "Sarge can't have everyone. I need you here to get this civil rights work on track.

When I reminded him that he had first enlisted me to work on Asian and African matters, and explained that the Peace Corps was an idea that had been close to my heart for ten years, he conceded that Shriver could have part of my time.

When the task force began its planning, we agreed that the Peace Corps should not be advanced as an arm of the Cold War, but as a genuine experiment in international partner ship. We also agreed that while the education of Americans and of people in the newly developing nations where we placed the volunteers was important, the program would stand or fall on whether it would do what Kennedy promised—to help foreign lands meet their urgent needs for trained personnel. If our volunteers did not succeed in doing that, they would not long be welcome in foreign lands.

The Peace Corps would also constitute a new form of overseas work. Volunteers would not be missionaries, business representatives, government officials, intelligence agents, or researchers. Nor would they be highlevel experts or advisers. They would go in a new capacity—to teach, to build, or to work in the communities and villages to which they were sent, serving local institutions and living with the people they were helping.

Recruiting, selecting, and training effective Volunteers was the first critical problem. A large pool of applicants would be necessary if the best talent was to be found, particularly when we were



A Peace Corps volunteer discusses his recent assignment in Columbia with Temple University students at the opening of Peace Corps Week at the university's Mitten Memorial Hall in 1966.

asking people to sign up for two years overseas with no salary except living allowances and a seventy-five-dollar-amonth post-service stipend. We hoped that once the Peace Corps was a going concern, much of the training for it could be integrated within the four-year college curriculum for students interested in joining after graduation. Standards would be set for language study and courses on the history, economics, politics, and culture of the area to which the student would like to go, along with training in particular skills, such as teaching.

What were the first steps undertaken to launch the Peace Corps?

A clear statement of purpose was required. From the first sessions of the task force several purposes had been articulated. Shriver, who served as the chair, welcomed a candid dialogue among the contending viewpoints. Among the views were: providing trained manpower for development; promoting mutual international understanding; creating goodwill toward America; and educating the volunteers and their fellow citizens. Finally, we

agreed on three propositions about the program: to can contribute to the development of critical countries and regions; it can promote international cooperation and goodwill towards America; and it can also contribute to the education of America and to more intelligent American participation in the world.

In February 1961, when Sargent Shriver submitted the report of the task force to the President, he suggested that the Peace Corps be launched right away, instead of waiting for Congress to appropriate special funds for it. Applying the theory of executive action developed for civil rights, we encouraged the President to allocate sufficient funds from existing Mutual Security appropriations to permit a number of substantial projects to begin immediately. That made it possible to have several hundred volunteers in training during the summer, and not to lose the chance to recruit the most qualified people from the graduating classes of 1961.

On March 1, 1961, Kennedy issued an executive order creating the Peace Corps on a temporary basis, and sent a message to Congress recommending the establishment of a permanent Peace Corps.

On March 1, 1961, Kennedy issued an executive order creating the Peace Corps on a temporary basis, and sent a message to Congress

A pattern in your career has been moving between academia and politics. What has been the attraction to academia?

I would like to believe that my time in academia provided the opportunity for a serious reflection of ideas, being away from the whirl of politics. I've always been impressed with the idea of withdrawing for reflection in order to return to the larger society for constructive action. Indeed, academia should be that, a place for serious reflection of ideas.

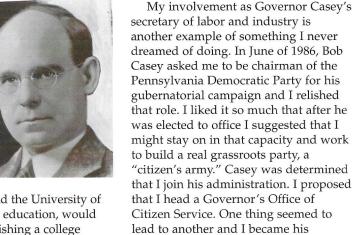
To be honest, I got into academia by accident. First, Father [Theodore] Hesburgh induced me in to teach law at Notre Dame over my wife's great opposition. Kennedy had already asked me to join his staff and that was a more attractive situation for her than living in South Bend, Indiana. But I had already made a commitment to Father Hesburgh and, as it turned out, I had a wonderful time there. But I had never thought of being a law professor.

After Notre Dame, it had never occurred to me to be a college president until 1966, when the head of the State University of New York came to me and

asked me to organize an experimental college at Old Westbury. He felt that my experience with the Peace Corps, as well as my interests in the Great

Books curriculum and the University of Chicago approach to education, would be valuable in establishing a college based on the twin themes of education and action and education and reflection. Of course, I jumped at the opportunity. Four years later, out of the blue, Bryn Mawr College offered me another kind of challenge and, again, I accepted it. I served as Bryn Mawr's president for eight years, beginning in 1970. I had a total of twelve years as a college president that I had never intended.

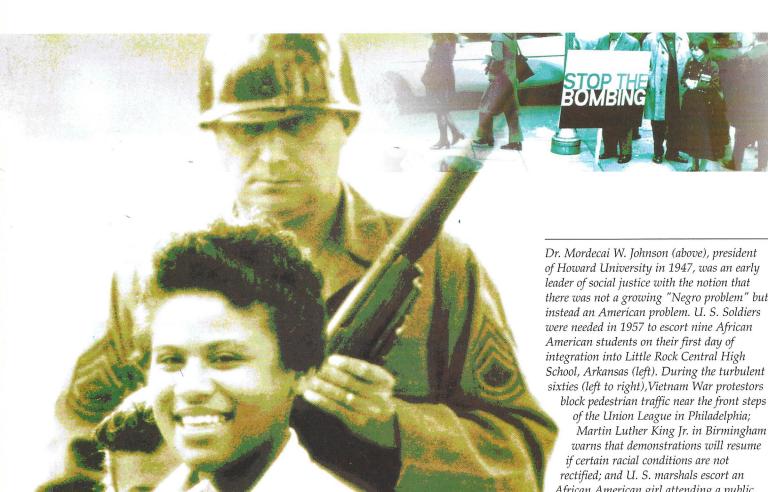
From 1987 to 1991 you served as Governor Robert P. Casey's Secretary of Labor and Industry.



When you won election to the United States Senate in 1991, the press labeled you an "empowering idealist" and an "unreconstructed liberal." How comfortable were you with these characterizations?

Secretary of Labor and Industry.

First of all, I've never thought of myself as "liberal" because on most occasions in my life, I didn't hold the same views as a liberal. When I was in high school, for example, I wanted to go



to war to fight Adolph Hitler and the liberals were for aid to the Allies without going to war. I was for a union or federation of democracies as the nucleus for a world government, and the liberals of the early 1940s were for good relations with Russia which I would have left out of the federation. By and large, the people I thought of as liberals were the people who advocated good relations with Russia and I was an early anti-Stalinist.

The same is true of the term idealist. I've never liked idealists. I have a rather tragic view of politics and history. I think the nature of the human condition is that you don't achieve ideals. You better have ideas, or self-evident truths, that you must try to realize, but I really don't expect to realize them. That is human nature. If your ideals are right, you will never achieve them. The term idealist, however, suggests that you intend to achieve all the things you hope for.

and civic education; and to expand opportunity by helping make education more affordable.

AmeriCorps has been called a "domestic Peace Corps." Does it resemble the Peace Corps?

I once caught myself saying that what we want for AmeriCorps is to earn the same status as the Peace Corps, a status of constructive activism abroad in which all Americans can take pride. I really don't want it to become a nice, symbolic organization that is limited to twenty-five thousand volunteers. I want all young Americans coming of age to engage in service.

What are your hopes for the success of a national service initiative?

I do believe that the Summit on Community Service—which has been endorsed by both Democrats and Republicans alike—can crack the atom of civic power and if it does, we will make

people that will carry over to future generations, but we will resume what the Kennedys and the kings had intended for our country.

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The author thanks Harris Wofford for taking the time out of a demanding schedule for this interview, as well as Joe Bongiovanni and Mary Sheridan of AmeriCorps for their assistance in arranging the interview and reviewing the final version.





What is the mission of AmeriCorps, the federal agency you began leading in 1995?

AmeriCorps, administered by the Corporation for National Service, was created by President Bill Clinton's National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993. This act aimed to strengthen communities by bringing together a wide range of citizens of all ages and backgrounds with local and national non-profits, city, state, and national leaders, and local businesses and organizations. The mission of Ameri-Corps centers around four goals: to get things done by helping communities address critical issues of education, public safety, human needs, and the environment; to strengthen communities by bringing people of all backgrounds together to solve problems locally; to encourage responsibility through service history. I am ready for disappointment, though. I've had it enough times in my life. After all, my luck with the three people who meant the most to me during the middle years of my professional life—John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King-were all killed just as they were beginning to make a real difference in this country. Then again I do realize that to work with those three individuals was to have the best luck in the world. Through the turmoil of the civil rights movement, they taught the American people how to question, how to achieve this nation's potential for social justice. You could see the Constitution at work because of their efforts. You could see people learning.

If national service is given an earnest chance by the corporate sector, as well as by individual Americans, then we will not only have succeeded in instilling a sense of civic responsibility in our young

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