

Reflection On Civic Action

FROM MY PERSPECTIVE - Joe Klein

I entered the University of Pennsylvania in September 1964 intent on a career in public service, starting with a stint in the Peace Corps. By the time we graduated, in 1968, there was no way I could represent a government that chose to pursue the war in Vietnam. I did not serve. I was not alone. It was a defining decision for so many of our generation—and, in the end, a significant one. It distinguished us from our parents, who had served and sacrificed through the Great Depression and World War II. It doomed us to a perennial fecklessness, grand ideals unmitigated by hard experience; self-regard unmitigated by the humility that comes with a sense of community.

So what do we do now, at the end of our long, strange trip? I spent the last fifteen years of my career as a journalist studying the US military, from the

Pentagon to the front lines in Iraq and Afghanistan. I saw the moral and spiritual effects of devoted service on a generation that volunteered after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. They are different from us. They have a sense of community and responsibility so many of us (but not all, of course)—and our fellow Baby Boomers—have lacked. More than 90% say they want to continue to serve in their communities after they muster out from the force. I interviewed hundreds of them; I joined them in their post-war public service...and you can, too. You can deploy with Team Rubicon, a network of 60,000 post-9/11 veterans who do disaster relief. I pushed a wheelbarrow for TR when they cleaned up after the Oklahoma tornadoes; my nickname—written on my grey t-shirt—was “Gramps.” They welcomed my participation. It was exhilarating. These young people taught me the importance of community created by mutual sacrifice; even their signature ailment, post-traumatic stress was, I found, as much a result of the loss of the intense communities they’d created in the military as it was a result of the things they’d seen and done downrange. We need more like them if we’re to survive as a democracy. I’ve come to believe you can’t do democracy without citizenship. And citizenship entails more than just voting. It means actively rebuilding the institutions—from our neighborhoods to the federal government—that we’ve allowed to languish over the past 50 years.

I believe there are two things we can do now: We can fight for a robust program of full-time national service for college graduates. It should include

Service as teachers, police officers, health and emergency personnel. We can also, belatedly, serve. We can support groups like Team Rubicon. We can form our own organizations—to help out in the schools, tutor students, serve the needy. We can, and should, do this quietly, for a change. We’ve been a very noisy generation. It’s time to shut up and put up.