

## HOW OUR TEENS CAN SAVE AMERICA



By Richard A. Schere, Ph.D.

If our American democracy is to achieve its great potential, it must develop a balance between two opposing cultural forces. The first is that of competition, individuality and self-gratification; while the second is that of cooperation, community and concern for others. At this point in time, it would seem that we are very much *out* of balance. We are over-weighted toward competition, individuality and self-gratification. This is most easily demonstrated by noting with what the media continues to bombard us. There is an overemphasis on who wins and who loses, and on acts of violence. This is because the media, like so many other institutions in our culture, has been swallowed up by the "competition force" and is controlled by the power of the profit motive. Robert McChesney, Ph.D. has documented this in his many publications and believes that the situation is grave. With regard to broadcasting, for example, McChesney sees the *Communications Act of 1934* as "essentially allowing monopolistic rights to broadcasters who had shown the greatest propensity for profit. Subsequent to this act were the provisions of the *Fairness Doctrine*, which had provisions for public interest broadcasting due to the scarcity of the broadcasting resource. These restrictions were later overturned in the 1980s under the banner of *deregulation*." McChesney's example of broadcasting would seem to extend to all forms of

media (e.g. television, newspapers, even magazines). Since the media influences all of us powerfully in both overt and covert ways, it is not surprising that our democracy has been pulled so far out of balance and why so many of our citizens reflect less empathy and more apathy toward important issues that affect others. It would seem at times that, rather than consider carefully all sides of an issue, too many adopt their "team's position" and search for arguments to support it. As predicted by Galen, an ancient doctor/philosopher, without a rebalancing of this trend our democracy may indeed perish from excess of its basic principle.

I believe that our teens can save America. I believe this for a number of reasons. First, teens are in a developmental stage that involves a restructuring of attitudes, values, and understandings as they struggle to move away from their earlier influences in order to establish their own unique identity. Second, they can be energetic and strong and can contribute much if they are properly guided and trained. Third, they need to be helped to manage the new stage of development into which they are entering, the Odyssey struggle, which is, especially in these times, excruciating and arduous.

As Carlson (2010) has pointed out, adolescents

experience a significant shift from the simple, concrete, and global self-descriptions typical of young children to defining themselves based on new values, thoughts and opinions. Adolescents begin to conceptualize multiple "possible selves" they might become and the long-term possibilities and consequences of their choices. Exploring these possibilities may result in abrupt changes in self-presentation as the adolescent chooses or rejects qualities and behaviors, trying to guide the *actual* self toward the *ideal* self (who the adolescent wishes to be) and away from the *feared* self (who the adolescent does not want to be). For many, these distinctions are uncomfortable, but they also appear to motivate achievement through behavior consistent with the ideal and distinct from the feared possible selves (Aunola & Nurmi, 2005). A local glimpse of what high school students have contributed through the requirement of many of their schools to complete a semester service project demonstrates how helpful they can be to various efforts in education, health care and other community activities. And now, because adolescents cannot immediately enter adulthood in these times and must find ways to extend their education and experience if they are to be qualified for the adequate paying jobs of the future (Schere, 2012), there may be indeed a unique opportunity to make a dramatic difference.

What if all adolescents, upon completing four years of, or graduating from, high school, were required to complete an 18 month program in a Youth Force for America. In this program, they would receive on-the-job training based on their interests and skills that would count as college credit. Utilizing this training, they would be sent out to assist in projects crucially important to our future such as improving infrastructure, assisting businesses that are developing new sources of energy, facilitating medical care and research in hospitals and clinics, aiding in efforts to reduce global warming and extending conservation and national park programs, and helping to reinforce efforts to improve education for children. Hopefully, they would come in contact directly with many different populations and experience the significance of many of our nation's problems.

Would they return from this experience with a sense of accomplishment and a better sense of who they are and what they want to do with their lives? Would

they have developed a deeper empathy for others and for their problems? Would they be less likely to be apathetic about political and other issues? Would they more likely resist being pulled carelessly to any given side of an argument and instead seek objectivity and compromise? Would they be further along in resolving the confusing dilemmas of their Odyssey struggle? For many, hopefully, the answers to these questions would be yes.

If understanding is feeling strongly the truth of what we know, then the emotion that pulls us needs to be informed by experience, and thus we must provide the appropriate experience for future citizens to accurately understand.

Traditionally, we have sent our youth off to fight and possibly die in foreign lands. They have returned wounded both mentally and physically and often less capable to deal with adult life. Wouldn't it be better to send boys and girls into a peace army where they would return with skill, concern, pragmatic idealism, and more capable of completing college and/or qualifying for a job that can truly support them? Indeed, don't they deserve this opportunity?

Most important, wouldn't they return more able to help our democracy regain the balance it so desperately needs?

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