

Restoring service

May 25, 2006

PRESIDENT BUSH posed in shirtsleeves two years ago with members of the National Civilian Community Corps as they cleared invasive plants from an estuary in Florida. "These are good kids from around the country who are dedicating time to help America," Bush said in a press release from AmeriCorps, the NCCC's parent agency. "I want to thank you for your service."

Last year, Bush joined other NCCC members who had moved in swiftly after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans. Some NCCC teams were deployed to Alabama and Mississippi to help set up shelters within a day after Katrina made landfall, showing greater alacrity than FEMA. Despite Bush's staged public relations events and the apparently genuine rhetorical support he has expressed for national service all through his presidency, the hard reality is far different. The budget Bush has submitted for Fiscal 2007 would terminate the NCCC, slashing its appropriation from \$26 million to \$5 million, and that only to close the five bases from which it operates. Cuts to other service programs would not kill them altogether, but represent a serious and unwise retrenchment. Learn and Serve America, which now involves some 1.5 million students, encourages them to integrate community service with their academic study. Numerous studies demonstrate the practical value of the work. Yet Bush wants to fund Learn and Serve at some \$8 million below its peak funding of \$43 million.

And the overall budget for AmeriCorps programs is set by Bush at \$384 million, down from \$441 million just three years ago.

It is up to Congress now to loosen the noose the Bush administration is putting on service in America. As 16 senators, including both from Massachusetts, wrote recently, "Americans want to serve. We should be expanding their opportunities, not eliminating them." Bush's true feelings on this issue are hard to fathom. His expressions of support have seemed real, yet he never delivered all that he promised, and he is now squeezing an established, proven set of programs cruelly. Perhaps he is doing it reluctantly, boxed in by persistent budget deficits. But of course he built that box largely himself. Whether the cuts are proposed in sorrow or joy, they are cuts.

Congress now has the job of examining the evidence. Some have questioned the cost of the NCCC, which runs close to \$25,000 a year for each member. But that investment buys highly trained emergency response teams -- which have proven their effectiveness -- not to mention committed graduates. For a nation concerned about emergencies, both natural and man-made, Congress should be growing NCCC and AmeriCorps, not strangling them.