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Muting the Call to Service

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AmeriCorps needs an emergency infusion of \$100 million just to maintain its current operations. While the Senate voted to appropriate the money, the House of Representatives refused to approve the emergency funds — and then adjourned for the summer. Meanwhile, the administration has been largely silent — and it remains unclear whether it will press Congress to provide the funds in September.

Which is confusing, considering how vocal President Bush has been about the need to maintain and even expand our national service programs. At one time, in fact, the president proposed expanding AmeriCorps to 75,000 members. "We need more talented teachers in troubled schools," the president said in his 2002 State of the Union address, the first after 9/11. "U.S.A. Freedom Corps will expand and improve the good efforts of AmeriCorps and Senior Corps to recruit more than 200,000 new volunteers."

It was the president's words that encouraged young people to send in AmeriCorps applications. Thousands of outrageously qualified applicants were prepared to quit high-paying jobs, to put off graduate school, to move to, say, rural Louisiana — all in the name of national service, in the name of doing something selfless for a country that needed healing. AmeriCorps approved new volunteer slots and assumed it had the support of Congress and the president. Now, on the eve of a new school year, Congress and the White House have turned their backs on these volunteers.

Must we note that the \$100 million that could save AmeriCorps is less than one-tenth of what we spend in Iraq every week? Is it too obvious to mention that the president, who long scorned nation-building abroad while encouraging education here at home, is now clearly choosing the former over the latter?

It's no secret that many in the G.O.P. have long favored the dissolution of AmeriCorps. And though the process won't necessarily be speedy, Republicans in the House are well on their way to making the program a thing of the past. And what happens then? Who or what steps into the chasm created by the White House's failure to act? No one knows. But what is certain is that a generation that was beginning to engage with government, with citizenship and service, will be abandoned, and will be given good reason to shrug back into an easy and familiar, "Well, what did you expect?" sort of cynicism. In fact, the best and most idealistic members of this generation are the ones who will feel most betrayed. Preventing this is within Washington's power — and \$100 million is, relatively speaking, a paltry amount to pay for keeping alive the volunteer spirit of the youth of this country.

Dave Eggers is author of "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius."

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