

“A Call to Service:” Remarks by the President at Signing of the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, April 21, 2009

SENATOR KENNEDY: This is a wonderful day -- [APPLAUSE] -- for all of our country and all Americans who will now have a chance and the opportunity to give back to their communities and the nation; the nation that we love so much.

Special thanks to Barbara Mikulski, who gave her heart -- [APPLAUSE] -- Barbara Mikulski, who gave her heart and incredible leadership to bring us here today. And Orrin Hatch, our partner from the beginning -- [APPLAUSE] -- who helped us from the beginning and who helped us win our broad and wide and bipartisan support.

To Senator Mike Enzi, to Chairman Miller, Congressman McKeon, and all champions for our cause, we thank you. [APPLAUSE] And a very special thank you to all who serve. This bill was forged for you and by you. [APPLAUSE]

I will never forget the fifth anniversary of the Peace Corps, where I sat with the very first group of volunteers. I asked each of them why they decided to become involved. And they said it was the first time that anyone asked them to do anything for their country.

Today, another young President has challenged another generation to give back to this nation. Last spring at Wesleyan University, candidate Barack Obama summoned our nation to a new era of service. He said, "I believe with all my heart that this generation is ready and eager and up to the challenge."

Mr. President, I couldn't agree more. Don't you? [APPLAUSE] You have inspired a new generation of Americans and your own example and your own call recognizes that. You have walked the walk and today you have paved it for many, many others.

I am deeply honored to introduce him now: my friend, our leader, the President of the United States. [APPLAUSE]

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Thank you. Please be seated. Thank you. Well, what an extraordinary day. It is good to be here with all of you.

I want to, first of all, thank President Bill Clinton for joining us here today -- where's President Clinton? -- [APPLAUSE] -- for his lifetime of service to our country, but also the fact that he created AmeriCorps, and that not only made this day possible, it has directly enlisted more than half a million Americans in service to their country; service that has touched the lives of millions more.

Now, it just so happens that one of those people who have been touched by AmeriCorps was FLOTUS, otherwise known as First Lady of the United States -- [LAUGHTER] -- Michelle Obama, who ran a AmeriCorps-sponsored program, Public Allies, in Chicago. [APPLAUSE]

I also want to thank former First Lady Rosalynn Carter for being here -- [APPLAUSE] -- for her advocacy on behalf of those with mental illness, and for her husband's continued good works that inspire us all. I am thrilled to have Caroline Kennedy here -- [APPLAUSE] -- for carrying on her family's long legacy of service.

To my congressional colleagues who did such a fantastic job on a bipartisan basis ushering this through, starting with the two leaders of the House and the Senate, Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid, I'm grateful to them, and obviously to Barbara Mikulski and Orrin Hatch, George Miller, the entire delegation who helped to shepherd this through -- please give them a huge round of applause. [APPLAUSE]

To my outstanding Vice President, Joe Biden. [APPLAUSE] To Dr. Jill Biden. [APPLAUSE] A couple of outstanding public servants in their own right, please, a warm welcome for General Colin Powell and his wonderful wife, Alma. [APPLAUSE] For the outstanding Mayor of New York City, Michael Bloomberg. [APPLAUSE] And I've got to give some special props to my fellow Illinoisan, a great friend, Dick Durbin. [APPLAUSE]

Finally -- and I know that I've got some prepared remarks -- but I just want to go ahead and say it now. There are very few people who have touched the life of this nation in the same breadth and the same order of magnitude than the person who is seated right behind me. And so this is just an extraordinary day for him. And I am truly grateful and honored to call him a friend, a colleague, and one of the finest leaders we've ever had -- Ted Kennedy. [APPLAUSE]