Not the least praiseworthy of the academy’s traditions is that faculty members returning from sabbatical are expected to present a report on what they have accomplished to their colleagues. The two years I spent in Washington were, strictly speaking, not really a sabbatical. Indiana University did not, of course, contribute a portion of my salary. Indeed, so fastidious have we become about preventing anything that might look like favoritism toward a presidential appointee’s previous (or future) employer, I was actually forbidden to have official contact with my colleagues here, including those whose expertise might be helpful to my work in government, and when Gene Tempel and I met to discuss my plans for returning, we did so almost clandestinely, at a busy restaurant at Reagan airport. At the time I took office, I had made a commitment to write a paper for an IU seminar on the ethics of philanthropy. However, after consulting with the White House counsel (who you might think would have more important things to worry about), the ethics officer at the Corporation for National and Community Service, an IU alumna herself, ruled it would be unethical for me to do a paper on ethics for Indiana University, though it would have been perfectly proper if I did one for the University of Kentucky.
Nor was my sojourn in Washington a sabbatical in the sense of its being a period for recharging the intellectual batteries. To the contrary, once I had passed through the confirmation process (which for me, culminated in a pleasant hour with Senator Kennedy and his dog Splash), I began two years of 14-hour days, broken up by just four days of vacation and a few weekends in which I desperately tried to read a book (when I was not plowing through official papers). As head of a Federal agency whose mission was to encourage more Americans to volunteer, I had some special demands on my time; many holidays, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, as well as other dates throughout the year are now designated “days of service” and I, of course, was expected to show up for all of them. But friends of mine in other parts of the government seemed to be just as busy and looked just as tired. So were those “on the outside” (as we used to say, not unmindful of the implication that they were free, while we were not). Washington remains a one-industry town in which the rhythms of government set the tempo for most everyone who lives there.

If this sounds like a rather unpleasant way to spend a sabbatical, I should hasten to add that it had its compensations too. Whatever worldly-wise Washington hands might say, riding on Air Force One or in a Presidential motorcade, attending a state dinner, participating in Oval Office meetings, and having people you have never met stop you to have their pictures taken with you are gratifying and memorable events. As satisfying for me, in light of my responsibilities, was the opportunity to travel throughout the United States and see our voluntary tradition in action. (As I used to say, in my job, I had a chance to visit some of the worst parts of our nation’s communities and see some of our
nation’s best people.) And, as I will explain shortly, I left Washington knowing that I had accomplished a good deal of what I had gone there to do.

Still, the price of public service is a high one and the people who work for our government take their jobs very seriously. That is especially worth keeping in mind as we approach the end of a campaign season, which, as elections always do, tends to bring out the more divisive aspects of our political life, sharpening disagreements and exaggerating criticisms, so that by time voting day comes around, we cast our ballots as if for no other reason than to bring the discordant spectacle to an end. Even then, we are often too ready to accept stereotypes as reality and to turn objections to policies into questions of personal character or ability.

When I returned to campus last semester, I saw this first-hand. On the first night of classes, since I had finished introducing the course and describing its requirements with some time to spare, I invited the students to ask me about Washington, if they wished to. One raised a hand and perhaps in part facetiously, asked “Does George Bush have a brain?” Even though I knew that the President was not widely admired in the academy, that did take me aback, but I tried to turn the question into one of those “teachable moments” we all seek to find.

Before revealing my answer, however, last weekend The New York Times carried a well-timed story that shed some light on the question. Back in 2001, the cartoonist, Gary Trudeau, of Doonesbury fame, and newspapers, such as The Guardian, were taken in by a phony report that claimed, with attribution to a fictitious “Lovenstein Institute,” that George Bush’s IQ was below average at 91, while Bill Clinton’s was nearly off the chart at 182. This was followed by another hoax, which even fooled The Economist, to
the effect that the average IQ’s of people in the states which voted for Al Gore were greater – in one case, by as much as 28 points – than of those in the states which supported President Bush. State-by-state data on average IQ’s don’t even exist, but the people in the red and blue states are roughly equal in educational level and 8th grade achievement-test scores. Still, urban legends die hard, as evinced not only by my student’s question, but also by what the former editor of *The New York Times*, Howell Raines, had to say just last August: "Does anyone in America doubt that Kerry has a higher IQ than Bush? I'm sure the candidates' SATs and college transcripts would put Kerry far ahead."

As Josh Billings wrote, “The trouble with most folks isn't so much their ignorance. It's know'n so many things that ain't so.” And as a conservative writer (but no fan of the President’s), Steve Sailer, has shown, this particular fact does not stand up to much scrutiny. When he applied to Yale, George Bush’s SAT scores totaled 1206, which, according to Linda Gottfredson of the University of Delaware, translates into an IQ score of about 125, using Educational Testing Service norms for that time. This would place the President in 95th percentile of the intelligence distribution. That turns out to be consistent with his score on the Air Force Office Qualifying Test, which he took a few years later.

Senator Kerry has not chosen (or perhaps not been asked) to reveal his SAT scores. But he did take the Navy Officer Qualification Test when he was 22 and finished at the 50th percentile. Since Navy officers are a more selective group than the population as a whole, Sailer makes a series of extrapolations that lead him to conclude that Senator Kerry’s IQ was about 120, or at the 91st percentile. So, insofar as IQ scores measure
something meaningful in a President (and I would agree with Sailer that other features may count at least as much), President Bush would seem to have the advantage.

I did not have the benefit of Sailer’s research when I was asked about George Bush’s brain. But based on a number of meetings I had with the President, what I said was that whether or not he was a “policy wonk” intent on mastering the details of complex pieces of legislation (as Bill Clinton reputedly was), he was someone whose questions went right to the heart of proposals under discussion and who was open to new policy ideas, even though they might be politically risky. These, I added, were not the worst qualities one might desire in a chief executive.

As an example, I described a meeting in which I participated in the spring of 2002. The topic was AmeriCorps, a national service program created by President Clinton, but which President Bush had endorsed. I presented our plans for improving the program. After asking about some details, the President zeroed in on the crucial issue: “How is our version of AmeriCorps different from that of the Clinton administration’s?” I replied that the previous administration had emphasized using AmeriCorps members to provide services, such as by tutoring or working on conservation projects; while we would still assign them to such tasks, we also wanted to employ AmeriCorps members to strengthen the organizational capacity of the charities with which they were placed, especially faith-based and community ones. There were no further questions.

I recall this not simply to show that intelligent discussions have taken place in the Oval Office the past four years, but more importantly, to demonstrate that notwithstanding the acrimony surrounding our political life, we are still capable of addressing policy issues in a reasoned way and reaching decisions that are not readily
predictable. So strong had the Republican Party’s opposition to AmeriCorps been during
the Clinton administration -- Senator Lugar told me that only Mrs. Clinton’s health care
plan aroused greater passion -- that many believed it would not survive a change of party
in the White House. Yet, it not only did, but has grown by 50 percent -- from 50,000 to
75,000 members -- since President Bush took office, making him, I am told, the first
President in history to expand a national service program he did not create. And both he
and Senator Kerry have pledged further increases, if elected.

How did this happen? Although changes in organization and the Presidential
appointment process have been frequently studied, there is, surprisingly, much less
analysis of what happens to policies -- particularly controversial ones -- when the White
House changes hands. (One of the more interesting examples was the “9/11”
Commission’s account of how the 2000 election affected -- or to be more accurate, didn’t
-- efforts to deal with the threat posed by al-Qaeda.) In a political era characterized by
wider partisan divisions and more strongly ideological parties, a new administration
might be expected to try to make as clean a break as possible with programs its
supporters did not like, especially relatively new ones that have not had much time to
develop constituencies. Congress is just as divided, with fewer “consensus-building”
institutions (such as strong committees and party caucuses) than it used to have. Not least
important, the round-the-clock news cycle (not to mention the so-called “blogosphere”)
puts a premium on disagreements and disputes, rather than the far less attention-getting
finding of the middle ground.

On the other hand, enacting a new program requires forming a coalition that may
resist efforts to take its handiwork apart. Moreover, a closely divided electorate (and
Congress) increases the political risks of reversing earlier decisions, at least too abruptly. Finally, especially in the early part of an administration, the knowledge and influence of the permanent government (and of Congressional staff) are important and generally work against dramatic changes in policy direction.

Still, if ever a program seemed ready for the ash-heap of history, AmeriCorps was it. Widely known as President Clinton’s pet program, it was also thought by some Republicans to be a way not of enabling young people to spend a year or two working on social and environmental problems, while earning money to pay for college, but rather for recruiting and training “liberal” social activists. In addition, many conservatives objected to the notion of paying people a small stipend to “volunteer,” fearing that this would corrupt the motive to serve, rather than reinforce it, as the program’s advocates claimed. Though precise estimates were hard to come by, AmeriCorps looked to be costly, a matter of concern not just to Republicans, but also to many Democrats, who would have preferred the money to be directed toward more traditional social service programs.

These criticisms had led to strong Republican opposition to the creation of AmeriCorps in 1993. Once they had taken control of the House of Representatives, the Republicans regularly refused to appropriate money for it (though when the Senate later did, the House conferees would routinely yield). After the program’s authorization expired in 1997, it was not renewed (which contrary to what many learn in Government 101 is no bar to a program’s continuing, as long as money is available for it). To critics in conservative think-tanks and magazines, AmeriCorps symbolized the supposed tendency of liberal policy to expand government into areas where there was no need for it.
and perhaps even a stalking horse for a more coercive program that would require young people to serve, such as a draft.

AmeriCorps’ architects in the Clinton administration were well aware of the need to expand its political support. Shortly after the program was created, the first head of the Corporation for National and Community Service, Eli Segal, commissioned a study of how Sargent Shriver had built support for the Peace Corps. When first proposed by then-Presidential candidate, John F. Kennedy, the idea had been criticized by Republicans, including President Eisenhower, who termed it “Kennedy’s kiddie korps.” It had been enacted with the slimmest of majorities in 1961. But when it was re-authorized three years later, the vote was overwhelmingly in favor.

What happened? The study described a variety of political maneuvers that had been employed by Shriver, including frequent mailings to Congressmen and newspapers about the accomplishments of local Peace Corpsmen. It also helped, the report noted, that participants in the program were in remote parts of the world, where any problems they might encounter – or cause – would likely go unnoticed. That would not be true of AmeriCorps, which operated entirely in American communities.

Perhaps out of reticence, the study did not mention the principal factor that accounted for the acceptance of the Peace Corps: the assassination of President Kennedy. That was a fate no one wished on President Clinton and in the event, it did not happen. But that left unresolved the question of what would happen to AmeriCorps in the Republican administration that came to office in January, 2001.

In truth, the worries many supporters of the program had were exaggerated, though understandably so. Despite its identification with President Clinton, AmeriCorps
had actually originated in the administration of President George H. W. Bush, which worked with Congress to create a commission to study the idea of national service and fund some demonstration projects, such as City Year and Teach for America. As Governor of Texas, the incoming President Bush had been supportive, even to the point of joining his fellow governors in calling on Congress to re-authorize the program. One of those governors was Montana’s Marc Racicot, who would become a close campaign adviser; Racicot also sat on the board of AmeriCorps’ parent agency. During the campaign itself, although he spoke frequently about encouraging more volunteering, candidate Bush did not take a position on AmeriCorps. However at a press conference in Indianapolis, he indicated that if it were working, he saw no reason to change it.

Yet, the Bush administration came to office determined to cut public spending where it was not needed. AmeriCorps was rumored to be high on the list of those cuts. Another disadvantage the program had was that national service had been closely associated with the President’s main political rival, Senator John McCain, a connection that early in the administration (at least) was not necessarily a desirable one. While generally supportive of the program, the President himself had reservations about how it was actually running, based largely on meeting (and being less than impressed by) AmeriCorps members in Texas programs. At the program itself, there was next to no serious research that might have presented a more positive picture.

When Inauguration Day finally came, the fate of AmeriCorps thus looked to be hanging in the balance. But eight days later, at a White House ceremony, President Bush embraced it as part of one of his top domestic priorities.
Despite the laundry lists of proposals to be found in party platforms and on candidates’ web-sites, office-seekers generally campaign on positions rather than programs. That’s partly for defensive reasons; too many candidates have found themselves in too much hot water by trying to get too specific about what they would do if elected. But more importantly, most voters in a democracy are not policy experts; they make their choices on the basis not of detailed programs, but on the themes and character the candidates reveal (and where still meaningful, their party affiliation). Though not the worst basis for selecting people, it leaves open the question of what the winners will do once in office.

One of candidate Bush’s main themes in 2000 was “compassionate conservatism.” Partly a reaction to the perception that the Republicans who had won control in Congress in 1995 were more concerned with dismantling government programs than using them effectively, it also sent a message that he would bridge the gap among his party’s factions, in effect joining the legacies of Ronald Reagan’s presidency with that of his own father. Yet while he made numerous speeches on the theme (including a major one in Indianapolis), the program that would follow from it was less well-defined than his fiscal plans or his commitment to establish more rigorous standards for education.

The one element that seemed clear was that a Bush administration would reach out to the “armies of compassion,” faith-based and grassroots community charities, to assist them in enhancing their efforts to help the needy. Yet, how was this to be done? Increasing charitable giving was one way, but some of the administration’s fiscal plans, such as reducing tax rates and eliminating the estate tax, could produce the opposite
result. Changing how federal grant-in-aid programs were run so that the “armies of compassion” could become more competitive in seeking funding was another, but this approach was fraught with legal and administrative problems. Moreover, as research on this campus and elsewhere had shown, not all – perhaps not most – faith-based and community groups wanted or had the capacity to manage government grants.

That was where AmeriCorps came in. As an occasional advisor to the campaign, I suggested that appropriately assigned and trained, participants in the program could help these charities expand the number of people they served, recruit additional volunteers, and raise more money from either public or private sources. Indeed, about 15 percent of AmeriCorps members were estimated to be working with these groups already, and an even larger percentage in the small portion of the program that was descended from the “domestic Peace Corps” of the war on poverty, VISTA. It would seemingly be a simple and uncontroversial matter to increase that share.

The former mayor of Indianapolis, Stephen Goldsmith, who had been a top domestic policy advisor to the President’s campaign, and John Dilulio, who had been selected to head the new White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, grasped the idea immediately. And so it was, on January 29, 2001, when the President announced the creation of Dilulio’s office, he also announced his plan to nominate Goldsmith to the board of the agency running AmeriCorps with the assignment of getting more support from the program into faith-based and community groups. Thus did President Clinton’s most distinctive program re-emerge as part of President Bush’s most distinctive initiative.
By itself, this was sufficient to spare AmeriCorps from the budget axe. But it did not necessarily foreshadow any growth in the program. That occurred as a result of what became the transforming event of the Bush presidency, the terrorist attacks on the United States of September 11.

What the United States was like prior to that date is, today, not easy to recall. In the late summer, while the CIA and others were receiving warning signs of terrorist activity, the nation was transfixed by another sort of attack – from sharks -- along the East and West coasts. In the Bush administration, which I was about to join, the White House was planning an October effort to promote “communities of character.” The legislation embodying its “compassionate conservatism” initiative had stalled in the Congress, DiIulio had quit, and mobilizing enlistment in and support for the “armies of compassion” seemed to be in order.

But after September 11, that looked unnecessary. As President Bush would later observe, next to “Why did they do this to us?” the most frequent question he heard was “What can I do to help?” What, indeed? Moreover, what could be done to enlist ordinary Americans in a very different kind of “war effort,” while at the same time avoiding the kind of civic and economic disruption the terrorists were presumably hoping to foment? A White House task force was convened to address the new issue of “homeland security,” including how volunteers could be used. But practical ideas were hard to come by.

This university is rightly proud of its investment in instructional technology and it paid off when I asked one of the IU alumni I had brought with me to Washington to see what we could find out about what President Roosevelt had done to mobilize the United
States during World War 2. Not everyone was in the military, or even the defense industries, I reasoned. So how did the people who lived through that period become what Harvard’s Robert Putnam has called “the great civic generation”?

Using the skills of Internet searching she had learned, my assistant turned up a publication from the Office of Civil Defense in the Roosevelt administration called “What You Can Do to Help.” It made a simple, but powerful point: in time of war, everyone can do something. You can serve in the military or defense industries. You can volunteer for war-related activities, such as watching for enemy saboteurs or rolling bandages. And you can care for someone who is ill, help a needy neighbor, or do other kinds of charitable work. All of that was essential for the war effort.

The publication was forwarded to the White House and shortly afterwards, I was told by the aide with whom I was working, John Bridgeland, that the President had decided to make a large-scale call for volunteering part of the homeland security plan. It formed, in fact, the concluding portion of his 2002 State of the Union Address. In addition to asking all Americans to volunteer at least 4000 hours during their lifetimes, the President announced the formation of a new White House council, USA Freedom Corps, to ensure that this call would not be simply be rhetorical, but institutional, using (and if necessary, adjusting) the programs of government to support the desire of Americans to help.

For AmeriCorps, this translated into a proposal to increase its enrollment by 50 percent. Participants in the program would be assigned not just to the kinds of tasks they had already been doing, but also to assist the Red Cross, emergency rescue groups, police and fire departments and others who had homeland security responsibilities. They would
also be asked to devote at least some of their time to engaging other Americans in volunteering, thereby multiplying the impact of the program itself.

The President also endorsed a package of reforms aimed at re-authorizing and improving AmeriCorps. For example, under the law creating it, participants in the program were forbidden from assisting the groups with which they were working to raise money. And the scholarship awards they received for each year of service were treated as taxable income, unlike most fellowships. The Citizen Service Act was to change such provisions, as well as to provide a means for registering bipartisan support for AmeriCorps. It became a major legislative priority of the Bush administration.

But in the American system of government, that did not mean it was assured of enactment. Congress was designed to provide a “check” on the wishes of the Executive branch and shifts in the balance of power with the White House had made it more effective in that role. Not even a President who was riding high in the public opinion polls and had linked the program to the then still-popular “war on terrorism” would have an easy time winning approval for what he wanted to do with AmeriCorps.

As support for AmeriCorps grew in the White House, it produced a schism in Congress. While some changed their views, many longtime opponents hardened theirs, refusing to accept the fact that the Bush administration had embraced a program they despised. Shortly after the 2002 State of the Union, then-House Majority Leader, Dick Armey, told me that he not only opposed AmeriCorps, but also the President’s call to Americans to volunteer. “If your country needs you, it should draft you,” said the libertarian Armey. “Otherwise, it should leave you alone.” Rather than directly oppose the Citizen Service Act (and thus, the President), Republican critics took to avoiding a
vote, or adding provisions to the bill that would jeopardize the backing of long-time supporters.

At the same time, friends of the program, perceiving the White House’s newfound enthusiasm for it, saw an opportunity to go for more. Instead of the 75,000 members sought by the Bush administration, Senators Bayh and McCain called for expanding AmeriCorps to 150,000 over five years; Senator Kerry proposed to reach 500,000 in ten years’ time. How affordable and feasible these plans were was very doubtful. (Senator Bayh, for one, recognized this; he told me that he favored expansion only with rigorous evaluation to make sure that the program was working.) But the bidding war not only caused AmeriCorps’ opponents to resist more strongly, but also created false expectations among supporters that the conflicts which had beset the program’s early years were mostly over and smooth sailing was ahead.

This complacency was shattered by a hard-to-understand accounting problem. Since they did not have to be claimed for seven years, a trust fund had been established to provide the scholarships AmeriCorps members earned. But to keep costs low, its funding was based on estimated annual outlays, rather than obligations incurred, as the law required. (Think Social Security for a much larger example of the same situation.) This was of little practical consequence as long as enrollment in the program was modest and predictable. But a rearguard effort by the outgoing Clinton administration to keep the program alive by expanding the number of grantees and authorized positions in it, and the subsequent filling of these positions by Americans eager to serve after September 11, meant that the number of AmeriCorps members was increasing rapidly. By time that became clear, the trust fund was well on the road to insolvency.
Options for working out the problem at minimal cost existed. (As with any debt work-out, they essentially consisted of shifting unspent funds from one budget line to another, but that required legislative approval.) But because AmeriCorps had had a history of mismanagement, Congress resisted doing so without extracting a penalty. (“We know you’re not responsible for this,” an influential House member told me, “but we need to blame someone.”) The program’s opponents saw the problem as giving them another opportunity to derail the Bush administration’s plans for it without seeming to oppose the President. And its supporters – led by Senators Clinton and Edwards – used the need to curtail enrollment in the program to preserve the trust fund as evidence that the White House was not really sincere in its support for AmeriCorps. What had been an accounting problem, exacerbated by a surge of patriotic interest in serving the country, became a minor issue early in the Presidential campaign, making it more difficult to solve.

The ultimate resolution was a typical Washington one: all parties got a bit of what they wanted. In order to fix the trust fund, enrollment in 2003 was curtailed. But in 2004, Congress approved the President’s budget request to expand AmeriCorps to 75,000 members. The Citizen Service Act was never brought to a vote of either chamber. But through an executive order and administrative rule-making, the Bush administration was able to implement a number of its provisions, though not those which required legislation, such as eliminating the tax on the education scholarship.

As for me, I was grateful for the tradition that leaves-of-absence for government service usually are to last only two years. It enabled me to fulfill my role as scapegoat without hesitation, since I would soon be going anyway. And to leave knowing that I had
done much of what I had hoped to do. For any new program, but especially for a controversial one, the transition from the administration that created it to its successor always presents dangers. AmeriCorps had not only survived, but even, after a fashion, flourished.

AmeriCorps was created partly because many believed that young people had become increasingly cynical about and disengaged from civic life. Through serving their country full-time for a year or two, they would, it was hoped, not only accomplish socially useful tasks, but also develop the motivation and skills to be active citizens throughout their lifetimes.

It is still too soon to tell whether or not AmeriCorps is having such an effect on its members. But what happened to the program in the Bush administration provides a good lesson for those who might be skeptical about the capacity of government (or overly critical of the abilities of those who serve in it). In moving from a campaign position to a program, the Bush administration embraced an idea that many of its supporters disliked. And despite divisions and reservations, Congress ultimately backed it as well. The course was not smooth and none of the parties got what they wanted, but all wound up with a compromise they could accept.

Notwithstanding its institutional, legal, and political constraints, the people who held office, and the glare of media attention, American government accomplished something few thought it capable of doing. Not a bad outcome for AmeriCorps; not a bad way to demonstrate the usefulness of public service.