

Editorial

Time for a new CCC

Last week in this space we wrote about Diane Sawyer's recent ABC News documentary, "A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains," and the need to do more than dramatize the grim but all-too-familiar problems of Appalachia. We noted that we had been struck by something that Kentucky historian Ron Eller said about the need for fresh thinking about the region's future. "We just need to be willing to dream," he told ABC.

He's right. And there hasn't been enough of that lately. Forty-some years ago, a smattering of hopeful Kentuckians and other like-minded Americans dreamed the War on Poverty into being. It never became more than a half-hearted war, partly because the other war of that era – Vietnam – robbed it of resources. But, largely through the efforts of the Appalachian Regional Commission, it did at least channel some funds to the region to build modern highways and other infrastructure improvements. Without those basic changes, it's hard to imagine how eastern Kentucky would survive today.

Still, when we get to dreaming about how to help change the lives of young men and women who are living without much hope today – stuck in poverty, nothing to look forward to, no obvious reason to stay in school, not much chance of finding a job, dealing and doing drugs because that's what their peers are mostly doing – we don't look back to the War on Poverty. We look back further, dreaming of a time when the federal government acted boldly and decisively to help millions of Americans who were down on their luck, and we dream about whether something like that could happen again.

By the time Franklin Delano Roosevelt took the oath of office as president in 1933, the Great Depression was already in its third full year. The nation's banking system had failed; its mines, mills and factories had largely fallen silent; and one of every four Americans was jobless. All over the country, young men who had grown up expecting to find places in the workforce (which was then still largely male) discovered that nobody was hiring. Millions of the jobless young were poorly educated and without skills. They faced a future of poverty and despair – much like the future faced by many of today's young eastern Kentuckians, male and female alike, whose lack of hope, education, skills, and self-respect greases the skids that plummet them into dependence on drugs and welfare.

Roosevelt acted fast. He didn't believe in the dole, and within days he set up a temporary work-relief program that provided useful, paying jobs to millions of laid-off workers who desperately needed to be able to support their families. And in less than six weeks – 37 days from enactment to implementation – he had a program under way that was uniquely geared to meeting the needs of jobless young people while also spurring the restoration of forests and farmlands that had been stripped and eroded by the heedless timbering and plowing practices of the greed-driven past.

FDR called this new program the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and he was fully aware that the name had a double meaning. Civilians would do valuable conservation work – and learning to work together as part of a corps would also conserve civilians, turning them into productive members of a society that would soon need and appreciate them.

Although nominally under the direction of a civilian head, the CCC at the outset was actually under the direction of the Army – because the Army was the only branch of the federal government that knew how to rapidly organize and oversee the hundreds of new camps that would soon become home to thousands of enrollees.

What started out as an expedient way to get the program up and running turned out to be an ideal model for the long run: semi-military camps where young people from impoverished families could count on getting three square meals a day, becoming physically fit, learning essential skills and taking education courses in return for working hard and putting up with the indignities of military life such as reveille, roll call, and chowing down at community tables.

Those indignities were a small price to pay for a chance at a whole new life, and from 1933 until 1942 that is what the CCC offered to the more than 3 million young Americans who served in its ranks. Official histories tend to emphasize the billions of trees they planted, the millions of eroded acres they reclaimed, the trails and shelters and fire roads they constructed in thousands of national and state parks, and the CCC's many other tangible legacies. But just as important, if not more so, is the fact that you will never hear of a CCC veteran – and there are still a few of them among us – who didn't consider his experience in "the C's" to have been life-changing.

Without that experience, the vets often said, they couldn't imagine what would have happened to them – and they spoke of their service to their country with tremendous pride. For many, it was followed by leadership roles in the armed forces during World War II – and as combat leaders they suffered disproportionately high casualties. For that we owe them a deep debt of gratitude.

Fast-forward to 2009. In many parts of the country, including eastern Kentucky, it's getting hard to detect the difference between "recession" and "depression." We have a crisis on our hands, and not much of the just-enacted economic stimulus seems aimed directly at rural Appalachia. Regional joblessness is rampant, and thousands of young men and women are on the slippery slope of hopelessness. Could a new CCC help? We'll never know unless we try.

Plenty of regional projects that are either planned or under way could be scaled up. To take just one example, the Appalachian Regional Reforestation Initiative and the Appalachian Coal Country Watershed Team are cooperating in the launch of a demonstration project in Letcher County to reforest old strip mines – a project that could be replicated on the more than 700,000 acres of old mined lands in the Appalachian coalfields that have never been properly reclaimed. There's a lot of talk these days about creating green jobs and sequestering carbon. Planting trees, CCC-style, does both.

Look around. National and state parks have been underfunded for 25 years, and they're showing the stress from heavy wear and tear. There are thousands of shovel-ready improvements on administrators' wish lists. Walk the 1,200-mile-long Appalachian Trail: you'll see that many if not most of the shelters are in disrepair. Explore our hollows: streams need to be restored, back-road bridges rebuilt, trash picked up, the homes of the elderly weatherized . . . there's more than enough work to be done. We just need the will.

Finally, this thought: Would you rather invest your hard-earned tax money in the \$50,000 to \$75,000 it takes to incarcerate a drug-buyer for a year – knowing that when he or she gets out, the odds of a repeat are high – or would you like to invest in seeing that person given a decent shot at a decent life through participation in a program that benefits everyone?

This isn't a question of liberalism or conservatism, it's a question about the future of our country.

And the answer? It's time for a new CCC.