

SOLVE FOR X

HOW TO GET GEN Z TO SIGN UP TO “TBD”? BY MAKING THE PRICE OF FREEDOM REAL

ADM. DANIEL CALLAGHAN ESSAY COMPETITION 2016

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It’s a good thing I like numbers.

As students at Saint Ignatius, all 1,441 of us will spend three to four years in math classes. According to my freshman Algebra teacher Mr. Sandeep Bhuta, almost anything can be calculated. Algebra (which is Arabic for *Al Jabr*, or “the reunion of broken parts”¹) teaches us that if we can measure a thing we should be able to increase it. So how can we grow the ethic of service in my peers, or Generation Z²?

I asked Mr. Bhuta how to calculate the cost of freedom, and tried dividing the most recent defense budget of \$601 billion³ by the U.S. population of 322,712,018⁴, to find that protecting our way of life cost each American \$1,862.34 this year. But that is too basic a measure for the cost of freedom, and the value of preserving it through service. I wanted to calculate that delta between what it costs to live in a free economy and what it would cost to live in an unfree state. But the value of freedom is incalculable, it’s priceless.

Because I’m an immigrant I feel that value, and what holding an American passport means. That blue booklet with its gold eagle weighs just 1.25 ounces, or 36 grams on my mom’s baking scale but still feels special, like magic in my hand. It stands for equality, fairness, freedom of speech and press, the right to vote, equal treatment

¹ Online Etymology Dictionary, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=algebra>

² Marcie Merriman, “The Rise of Gen Z,”

[http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-rise-of-gen-znew-challenge-for-retailers/\\$FILE/EY-rise-of-gen-znew-challenge-for-retailers.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-rise-of-gen-znew-challenge-for-retailers/$FILE/EY-rise-of-gen-znew-challenge-for-retailers.pdf)

³ <http://www.businessinsider.com/how-the-us-military-spends-its-billions-2015-8>

⁴ <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/robert-schlesinger/articles/2016-01-05/us-population-in-2016-according-to-census-estimates-322-762-018>

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under the law, opportunity, access to education, welcoming immigrants, and much more. In the far away dictatorship where I was born, the average income is \$278 per month⁵, while the president for life has more than \$1 billion in secret Swiss bank accounts.⁶ As someone who comes from an unfree country where opposition leaders disappear and voting is rigged, living free is a gift. I owe everything including my life to this country.

But does patriotism translate to service? On a recent school trip to China I met Chinese high school students who confided their secret late night cyber techniques for getting around the Great Firewall. (That’s the joke name for the Chinese government’s Internet block.) What were these kids hacking into? Classes on Renaissance art and different approaches to doing math problems banned by their government. Even though the Chinese government will only allow the top 4% to attend China’s top universities it still expects devotion. That means 96% of the best Chinese students won’t get to attend a top school. “For us defeatism is a crime, and to strive for victory in the war of resistance is an inescapable duty,” wrote Chairman Mao Tse Tung.⁷ If you told 96% of SI students they couldn’t go to a great university, people would lose their minds. This made me wonder what would lead American students to feel this sense of duty, and to act on it through service.

⁵ <http://en.tengrinews.kz/finance/Average-wages-in-Kazakhstan-are-over-92-thousand-tenge-4355/>

⁶ <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav040502a.shtml>

⁷ “The Role of the Chinese Communist Party in the National War,” Oct. 1938, Selected Works, Vol. II, p.196, accessed Mar. 31, 2016, from <http://www.art-bin.com/art/omao18.html>

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At SI, we are encouraged to be people with and for others. Saint Ignatius of Loyola told us⁸ that “Love ought to show itself more in deeds than in words.” That means choosing work that will make a difference in the world. According to the English philosopher John Stuart Mill, “A man who has nothing which he is willing to fight for, nothing which he cares more about than he does about his personal safety, is a miserable creature who has no chance of being free, unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself.”⁹ As Ignatians, we are taught that it is our inescapable duty to be there for one another, to be in solidarity with others, and to be that better person.

How can we spread this commitment to service throughout the members of our generation? Business consulting company Ernst & Young has mined Big Data to examine my generation, Gen Z who are born after 1997. They found that my peers “may end up being one of our most ambitious, hard-working and innovative generations in history.”¹⁰ The Ernst & Young researchers said we differ from Millennials, by “an element of self-awareness versus self-centeredness, meaning the younger people placed a greater emphasis on their role in the world as part of a larger ecosystem and their responsibility to help improve it.”

⁸ http://www.magisspirituality.org/spex_reflection/gods-love/

⁹ John Stuart Mill, “The Contest In America,” *Frazer’s Magazine*, Feb. 1862, “Dissertations and Discussions” (1868), vol. 1, p. 26.

¹⁰ Marcie Merriman, “The Rise of Gen Z,”

[http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-rise-of-gen-znew-challenge-for-retailers/\\$FILE/EY-rise-of-gen-znew-challenge-for-retailers.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-rise-of-gen-znew-challenge-for-retailers/$FILE/EY-rise-of-gen-znew-challenge-for-retailers.pdf)

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My generation may be stronger than the Millennials because we are digital natives who have always been connected online. According to Ernst & Young, we have seen the highest unemployment rates since the Great Depression. School violence has made lockdown drills common. And there is a constant threat of harm through shootings, cyberbullying, online predators or terrorism. We’ve grown up in a state of war. A recent Washington Post article¹¹ estimated that the U.S. has been at war for 93.8 percent of my life.

But how do we translate these numbers into the good deeds that St. Ignatius encouraged? How do we get Gen Z to “defend freedom in its hour of maximum danger” as President John F. Kennedy said? We have to start not with clever marketing, but by telling the truth.

The truth is, even though we may not find an equation or a metric to measure it, freedom has a cost. I think every student should be required to spend time visiting with veterans. My great-grandfather, who lost his hearing in one ear when his ship’s engine room was struck by a torpedo at Pearl Harbor always said, “People don’t value what they don’t pay for.” When I volunteered this summer at the San Francisco VA Medical Center visiting with vets taught me more geography and history in an afternoon than a year of reading. It made me rush home to look up Tongkin, Manchuria, Guadalcanal, Sudan, Mosul, Kurdistan, and Kabul to try to figure out why we were there.

¹¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/05/18/heres-how-much-of-your-life-the-united-states-has-been-at-war/>

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But service has to be balanced, like an algebra equation. My generation must honor the example of Admiral Daniel Callaghan and the many Ignatians who have sacrificed their lives in World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War and the War on Terror. More than 163 of us have attended service academies, and I hope to join that number. However, our government needs to be honest in telling those who serve what they are committing to, and stand by them. The object of service has to be finite, not indefinite. The Department of Defense’s list of when the National Defense Service Medal has been awarded¹² lists the dates of the War on Terrorism from “September 11, 2001 to TBD.” I am committed to serving my country. But it’s frightening to think we’ll be at war forever, or TBD.

Ultimately the best way to increase my generation’s entering lives of service is not through mining Big Data or finding a magic algorithm, but through enlightened self interest, and finding what’s magic in each of us. As the Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi said, “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”

¹²<http://prhome.defense.gov/Portals/52/Documents/RFM/MPP/OEPM/Docs/NDSM%20Authorized%20Conflicts.pdf>