

Don't Bring Back the Draft

BY AARON STEELMAN

For most of American history, the U.S. military has been populated by volunteers. During the two World Wars, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, however, a draft was used. During the late 1960s, many people began to question the efficiency and fairness of conscription. Eventually, these skeptics — including some prominent economists — persuaded President Nixon to allow the draft to lapse. Since July 1, 1973, the United States has once again had a volunteer military.

But not everyone is convinced that this is a good idea. In fact, following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, a growing number of people — from across the political spectrum — have been calling for Washington to reinstate the draft. These supporters of conscription employ many arguments. But there are three claims that stand out above the rest.

First, an army of conscripts would be cheaper than an army of volunteers. Charles Moskos, a sociologist at Northwestern University, and Paul Glastri, editor of *The Washington Monthly*, bluntly state, “Draftees would not have to be offered the relatively high wages and benefits that it takes to lure voluntary recruits (an increasing number of whom are married with families).”

Second, the volunteer army relies too much on the labor of the poor and minorities, especially blacks, and a draft would help correct this inequity. Gail Buckley, author of *American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the Military from the Revolution to Desert Storm*, writes, “The military may be all-volunteer, but ... poorer whites and minorities enlist. Why should those who can't afford to go to college be the only young people who have to go to war?”

Third, young people don't appreciate the freedoms that they enjoy as Americans, and if they were required to serve in the military, they might become less complacent. Stanley Kurtz, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, has summed up this sentiment nicely. After Pearl Harbor, “America's men simply took it for granted that they would serve. In fact, they were eager to fight — to strike back for what had been done to America,” Kurtz writes. “But the truth is, many young people no longer share the eagerness of the ‘greatest generation’ for battle.”

Let's take these arguments in turn. It is true that the government would not have to pay conscripts as much as volunteers. But this does not mean that a conscript army is “cheaper” in any real sense. By drafting a soldier you are imposing a tax on him, equal to the difference between the wage at which he

would join the military on his own and the wage he actually receives. “This implicit tax in kind should be added to the explicit taxes imposed on the rest of us to get the real cost of our Armed Forces,” explained economist Milton Friedman. By ignoring such costs, one could argue that “the construction of the Great Pyramid with slave labor was a cheap project.”

Conscripts also tend to serve fewer years than volunteers. Indeed, during the Vietnam War, most conscripts left the military once they were legally able. In contrast, most volunteers today sign on for more than one hitch. This results in significantly lower training costs. What's more, volunteers, on average, enter the military with greater skills than conscripts, further reducing training costs.

Also, by keeping the cost of labor artificially low, a draft encourages the military to use enlisted men for tasks that could be done by machines. With conscription, “it pays to hoard labor, to use it wastefully, and to adopt capital-to-labor-ratios that are too low,” stated economist George Hildebrand.

The racial balance of the military is not, in fact, skewed toward one particular group. In a recent report opposing the reinstatement of the draft, the Department of Defense stated, “Today, black recruits closely parallel their representation among the youth population.” What's more, blacks “tend to be concentrated in administrative and support jobs, not in combat jobs.” Blacks account for 21 percent of the enlisted force, but make up only 15 percent of combat troops.

Finally, it's hard to rebut the claim that young people are “soft” or don't fully appreciate the importance of America's military and traditions. Those are essentially value judgments. How much weight you give to them depends on your perspective. But such claims must be balanced against another important and widely held value: individual freedom. Most people would agree that the government should have a compelling reason to force someone to do something he otherwise wouldn't. And it's not clear, for the reasons stated above, that forcing people into military service is such a reason. Indeed, as Doug Bandow, author of *Human Resources and Defense Manpower*, has asked rhetorically: “Is a military healthier if it relies on those who desire to serve and succeed or if it is forced to include those who desire to escape at any price?”

America's experience with a volunteer military hasn't been perfect, to be sure. But our country is safer and freer under such a system than under conscription. **RF**

“One strength of the volunteer army lies in its compatibility with our heritage of individual freedom; indeed, no other alternative is.”

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