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The Draft Is Nothing to Joke About **by Scott McPherson**

In an attempt “to achieve a full sharing of the sacrifice which will be required of the American people if the president chooses to invade Iraq,” Rep. Charles Rangel (D.-N.Y.), has introduced legislation that would require “compulsory military or national service for men and women, ages 18 to 26, without exemptions for college or graduate studies,” according to the *Washington Times*. Rangel is evidently hoping to use the bill to create opposition to the war by making it one that everyone’s children, not just those of the poor, minorities, or the politically weak, would potentially have to experience.

While Rangel deserves praise for opposing President Bush’s forthcoming attack on Iraq, he couldn’t possibly have chosen a worse way to state his case. Despite the fact that the bill is being offered apparently with tongue in cheek, it doesn’t change the fact that the draft is a form of slavery, which rips young men and women from their peaceful pursuits to kill and die as grist in the mill of presidential ambition. One would hope that the congressman, who is black and served in the Korean War, would be particularly sensitive to these facts, regardless of the political leverage he hopes to gain from this move.

Unfortunately, far from simply taking Rangel’s hint, some people in influential places seem to be taking his proposal seriously. In a January 8 letter to the editor, Ronald F. Conley, National Commander of the American Legion, wrote that his organization — and its 2.8 million members — have “long supported universal military training and Selective Service registration [and] the 108th Congress should hold hearings on how our nation will meet its long-term military manpower needs.” In an ominous closing, Conley suggests, “Perhaps Mr. Rangel ... can kick-start a constructive discourse on Capitol Hill.”

Let’s hope not.

Of all the laws that a government can pass against its citizens, there is none so despicable as compulsory service, be it military or civilian. In a republic founded on the principles of individual rights and private property, there is nothing more fundamental than the individual right to maintain strict ownership over one’s own body.

Compulsory service makes a mockery of those shining ideals. Though the various colonies — and later the states — had laws requiring service in the militia, it's worth pointing out that under the Constitution, the only authorized use of the militia is for domestic emergencies.

Free people are meant to be trusted to choose for themselves whether they will or will not serve in a national army; one could say that a volunteer-only military stands, in a sense, as a sort of democratic measuring stick of the popularity of the government's foreign-policy decisions. While many Americans beat their chests over the prospect of a second Gulf War, there does not seem to be a concurrent swelling of the military's ranks. That, more than any opinion poll, indicates how truly concerned the country is about the "threat" posed by Saddam Hussein.

As for the administration, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld opposes the draft because "there is no need for it." Which means that the president and his cabinet aren't taking a principled stand against the draft — they just don't think there's a "need" for one right now. Of course, that means that massive casualties in Baghdad or a war with North Korea could very easily cause them to change their tune. It's worrisome to know that the administration's opposition to the draft, like the congressman's support for it, is based purely on political expediency rather than on any genuine belief in the sanctity of individual freedom.

In the interests of opposing a war with Iraq, any and all peaceful means should be employed to try to shift the president from his present course. If Rangel is truly just trying to score points with his bill and does not actually intend to reinstate the draft, then perhaps he should threaten to introduce an article of impeachment against the president if he deploys American combat troops without a congressional declaration of war. This proposal could easily be laughed off as impractical, but it makes more sense than running the risk that a very bad idea offered in jest would be taken at face value and end up as the law.

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