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## **End Draft Registration!** **by Sheldon Richman**

Whenever U.S. Rep. Charles Rangel, the New York Democrat who will soon chair the House Ways and Means Committee, calls for resumption of military conscription, a host of powerful figures, Republican and Democrat, civilian and military, chime in at once to repudiate his proposal. They respond that the U.S. military doesn't need or want a draft. It's good to hear them say that, and let's hope they mean it. The draft has no place in a free society because it is slavery, the kind that can get you killed or put you in a position where you might kill someone else.

We opponents of the draft, however, would feel more comfortable if the people distancing themselves from Rangel would do something solid to show that they mean what they say. There's a great way for them to show their bona fides: end draft registration.

That especially goes for President Bush and his Pentagon officials. If they really don't want to start up military conscription, the president should issue an executive order ending registration. It would be that simple.

The draft ended in 1973, toward the close of the war in Vietnam. But President Jimmy Carter ordered every 18-year-old male to register with Selective Service in 1979 when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. This was his way of showing his disapproval of the invasion. How it was supposed to accomplish that is anybody's guess.

Ten years later the Soviets left Afghanistan in embarrassing defeat. That was also when the Soviets' Warsaw bloc started collapsing and the member countries turned away from communism. But did President George H.W. Bush end draft registration? No, he didn't. An oversight, I guess.

What possible reason is there today for imposing on 18-year-old males the requirement to register for a nonexistent draft and to compel them to inform the government whenever they change their address? If we don't need a draft, we certainly don't need registration for a draft. Even government officials ought to be able to follow that logic.

Rangel argues that with America at war in Iraq, it's unfair not to spread the burden of military service across socioeconomic categories. But a draft does not spread the burden. It concentrates the burden on those who don't want to bear it, while those who would have volunteered must accept a draftee's wages. The irony is that conscription would exclude many people who want to join the army because their slots would be filled with unwilling conscripts. How is that fair?

There is no getting around the fact that conscription is involuntary servitude. Rangel says the draft would ensure that unpopular wars would provoke public opposition, as it eventually did in the Vietnam War. But he conveniently forgets that that war, as well as the Korean War he himself fought in, were started under conscription. In the case of Vietnam, many draftees died before the protests started. A far better way to enable people to effectively object to wars is the volunteer army. At the very least, a society with pretensions of freedom should recognize the right of people to abstain from fighting wars they disapprove of.

Is the draft ever justified? How could it be? Even in a defensive war, one can't properly defend freedom by violating it. And there is no reason to believe that free people would not defend their homes under a genuine threat. What they might not do in sufficient numbers is fight imperialist wars. To that I say: Let's hope not.

Advocates of the draft harbor a premise that has no place in a free society — that the individual belongs to the state. Every American should find that idea revolting. It's time to end draft registration.

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