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## **Conscription: Not Now; Not Ever, Part 2**

**by Doug Bandow**

Dubious international commitments have exacerbated the military's recruitment and retention problems. Focus-group interviews have found young men to be reluctant to support America's increasing role as international policeman. Reported two researchers at the Defense Manpower Data Center,

Youth today generally view the military as less attractive than before the end of the Cold War. A considerable number of young men indicated they did not wish to serve as peacekeepers in foreign countries.... Some suggested that recent military ventures were motivated by the interests of national leaders — Congress or the President — but were not in the national interest. They objected to being put in jeopardy to fight someone else's battles.

Frivolous deployments have also harmed service retention. This may be the most important reason for the loss of Air Force pilots. A similar effect is being felt by the Navy. One serviceman complained, "We're not really fighting the country's wars; we're just acting like the world's policeman." The *New York Times* has reported that "the combat readiness, morale and effectiveness of the troops appears to plummet after six months of duty" in such operations. This problem is beyond the reach of conscription, unless Uncle Sam's lottery ticket means a lifetime of service.

Military columnist David Hackworth seems to take a different approach, suggesting that conscription would prevent the wasteful use of American soldiers. Regarding the fight in Afghanistan, he writes, "The draft would bring this war home to every family in America." This, in turn, would cause Americans to "better watch the threat conditions and how and where the war was being fought."

Yet the fact that the U.S. military is broadly representative of the American population means that the war is already being brought into the homes of many people. Such an impact is especially strong when reservists — often well-established members of the community ranging from cops to lawyers — are called up to serve. And volunteers have the power to hinder if not stop a foolish war by simply refusing to join; a draft allows the government to pursue an increasingly unpopular conflict, like Vietnam, through compulsory service.

### **Conscription and national service**

Another proposal is to use conscription for defense at home. Writes political columnist David Broder, "The reality is that homeland defense in the war on terrorism is bound to be labor-intensive, as demanding of manpower as the big wars of the past. But we do not have the vital tool we used in those wars: the draft." University of North Carolina journalism professor Philip Meyer argues,

A system of universal training — military, civil-defense or related skills that could be called into use on short notice to combat terrorism — would reduce [the gap between military and civilian society] and make the USA more democratic and, at the same time, a safer place to live.

Charles Moskos and Paul Glastris (see part 1 of this article) propose a three-part draft: choose among the military, homeland security, and civilian work. They write,

We are clearly going to need more armed federal personnel to guard dams, nuclear power plants, sports complexes, and U.S. embassies; more border patrol and customs agents to keep terrorists and their weapons from entering the country; more INS agents to track down immigrants who have overstayed their visas; more Coast Guard personnel to inspect ships; more air marshals to ride on passenger jets; and more FBI agents to uncover terrorist cells still operating inside and outside our borders.

Others use anti-terrorism as a hook for creating a mandatory program intended to meet other goals. “Our schools are as important to our future as are border patrols,” argues David Gergen of *U.S. News & World Report*. Cynthia Tucker, editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, makes a similar argument. “A draft for national service,” she writes, would not only allow staffing of the military and existing social programs, such as VISTA, but also new programs “to aid the elderly, the handicapped and the impoverished.”

Senators John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Evan Bayh (D-Ind.) have proposed legislation for a large expansion of the (currently voluntary) service program Ameri-Corps. But it appears to be a stalking horse for conscript service. McCain advisor Marshall Wittman of the Hudson Institute explains that a move to coercion “may be sooner than we think, depending on what the needs are in this war.”

A civilian draft is unprecedented, however. And it is not an intelligent means to fill such a diverse set of needs. If costs are not considered, “needs” will be infinite. But the proper number of librarians, or airport screeners, or INS agents can be decided only by balancing the benefits of their work against the costs of paying for it. Calling something homeland defense does not change the analysis. There are half a million bridges across America. To protect every bridge would entail at least a two-man detail at all times, with three shifts a day, plus weekend duty. That’s at least eight people per bridge, or four million people — the entire number of men and women turning 18 a year. Add in all of the other potential tasks, and, if we value people’s labor at zero, no one will be doing anything else.

Nor will conscription draw people into useful tasks at acceptable cost. Not everyone is fit to be an FBI agent; some people have talents suited to work other than manning an airport security checkpoint.

In fact, a labor draft involving the four million Americans who turn 18 every year would inevitably result in poor use of manpower. Inefficient central government control mixed with the usual political pork-barrelling would ensure a failure to make serious trade-offs among competing tasks. This is the experience of Ameri-Corps, which has funded “volunteers” to engage in all manner of low-value activities, including political activism. Anyway, if conscription is a good idea, then don’t draft the young; instead, follow Englishman John Derbyshire’s idea and grab cops, security personnel, private investigators, and others out of their present jobs. Not that doing so would save money. Conscription only shifts the burden of paying onto those drafted. There ain’t no free lunch when it comes to recruiting soldiers, training firemen, or hiring airport screeners.

A national service draft would simply foist the cost off onto the young, in the name of patriotism. Aren’t patriotism and civic commitment good things? Moskos and Glastris write, “It’s a shame that it’s taken terrorist attacks to reawaken us to the reality of our shared national fate.” But nothing in that shared fate suggests that we should abandon the shared principles upon which the American nation is based, most notably a commitment to individual liberty. Especially because freedom is the bedrock of our society.

Columnist Hackworth advocates renewed national service because it has “kept our country free since we booted out the Brits.” But it is not the “national” but the “service” that has kept America free. And it is service — voluntarily offered by brave young men and women — that will keep us free in the future.

Well, asks Mark Shields, “Should only American volunteers be asked to die in the defense of the United States?” Should only American volunteers be asked to die in arresting criminals? In fighting fires? In devoting their lives to the poor? A free society doesn’t mean there are no shirkers, content to benefit from the sacrifices of others. But that is the inevitable price of freedom. Allowing the pampered elite that populates Washington to decide how everyone else should spend his life is far too high a price to pay for such a dubious form of “fairness.”

In America, homeland defense does more than secure a plot of land. It protects an ideal, a free society built on respect for individual liberty and protecting it. Renewing conscription would destroy the very thing we are supposed to be protecting.

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