
WORKING PAPER SERIES

THE REINSTATEMENT OF THE DRAFT

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THE REINSTATEMENT OF THE DRAFT

The reinstatement of the draft is a hot issue generating more heat than light. But U.S. Congressman Charles B. Rangel is right. His rationale about spreading the risk to the middle class is only part of the potential benefit to the nation. It is especially unpopular among young middle-class people (and their parents) who fear the interruption of their lives or careers, as well as the possibility that they may be in danger and have to associate with “undesirable types” in military service. There is also the danger of being caught up in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. These are, in my judgment, self-serving arguments that do not place the interests of the nation first.

I believe the draft may have been one of the best ideas in our history. It forces unobtrusively a democratization of society at a critical time in a young person’s life and provides lasting benefits, including discipline, to the pampered younger generation.

Military service begins with basic training, boot camp or whatever you might want to call it. It is brutal, nasty, and dehumanizing but, in a special way, essential to reshape and redirect young people and to develop endurance together with compassion and understanding. It is an equalizer that cuts across socioeconomic classes and teaches individuals to overcome physical and mental obstacles and promotes pride in being able to do physically what many never thought possible. It also toughens the mind, helping to deal with setbacks in later life in a far more reasonable way once they have survived the rigors of eight weeks of indoctrination, pressure, and physical privation. Outward Bound does something

similar, but is very expensive and usually available only to the children of wealthy families.

During basic training and active duty, people of different educational and social backgrounds are thrown together and learn to depend on each other for survival. At this time, trainees come in contact with people they might never meet or care to meet otherwise and usually develop some understanding of what makes different groups of people think and act the way they do. After all, America is built on the theory of equality, which is rarely put into practice.

If all Americans were required to complete a year (or more) of national service when they reached age 17 or graduated from high school, there would be benefits to the nation that would offset the cost. National service could be accompanied by schooling or literacy training for those who lacked it. Since the period of service would come at a critical juncture in their lives, it is likely that many young people with limited education and skills could

begin training for a productive life rather than heading down the road to welfare and prison. A drastic reduction in the welfare or prison population in exchange for tax-producing individuals would certainly save the nation billions of dollars and help to train a shrinking work force.

Middle- and upper-income parents will object to an interruption of their children's education and career objectives and will dismiss service as a waste of time. Yet how many 17- or 18-year-olds know what they want to do with their lives? A period of discipline and physical activity for over-indulged teenagers will probably help them to focus better on their long-term goals and pursue them with greater vigor once they are discharged from the service. They will also have the training that will serve the nation well during times of national emergency.

Many of us who were drafted and served were grateful for the time that allowed us to redirect our lives more productively. Some will object to military training, but there is no reason why draftees cannot be put to peaceful and productive use. They would serve usefully as security for our installations and infrastructure that could be at risk, as well as some crumbling infrastructure that needs attention but lacks dollars and bodies to put it back together. Many skills could be learned on equipment that repairs roads, bridges, buildings, and other projects of the Army Corps of Engineers. Think of the many benefits

Perhaps some historical perspective is useful. The Roman Empire was probably the most effective political entity that has ever existed. As long as it maintained a citizen army, it was virtually invincible. Yet when the wealthier citizens chose not to serve and give money for a substitute or replacement, Rome's fortunes changed. Barbarian non-Roman mercenaries were given responsibility for national defense and the increased cost of defense bankrupted the empire. The power of the army or legions no longer composed of citizens was so great that they created and deposed emperors almost at will. The disastrous third and fourth centuries eloquently attest this.

A citizen army is harder to control, but it keeps the commanders honest. The Pentagon and defense industry have few controls other than limited fiscal restraints imposed by Congress and the president as commander-in-chief. The Constitution specifies that there be civilian control of the military. Congress has the power to fund the armed forces and declare war. The president is the commander-in-chief and also has the power to confer military rank and command. Yet in recent years the military elite, most of whom were trained in the service academies, have been effective in lobbying Congress to promote their own interests—which do not always correspond to national interests. A recent study from Duke University has shown that about two-thirds of the field grade officers identify with the Republican Party and corporate interests and have been able to manipulate a Republican Congress quite successfully. This was not the intent of the framers of the Constitution. Perhaps the reintroduction of the draft (for men and women) will be able to curb the greed and power of these oligarchies and at the same time prepare ordinary people to defend the nation, both physically and intellectually.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Congressman Rangel for an idea that may save our nation.

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that resulted from the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) and the WPA (Works Progress Administration) during the Great Depression.