

The war on terror, and earlier problems in filling military positions, yield intriguing practical arguments over whether a new form of conscription should be considered. Is it...

Time to Bring Back the Draft?



Charles Moskos

If there was any upside to the terrible events of September 11, 2001, it was the perception of Americans coming together. The press highlighted the patriotic upsurge all across our country. There was,

however, no increase in young people seeking to enter the armed forces in the weeks following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Despite all the flag waving, recruitment concerns remain at the forefront of the problems facing today's U.S. military.

Even before the war on terror opened, our armed services were already undermanned. The only way to resolve their serious shortages is to bring back the draft. It is time to construct a new form of American conscription that will restore the citizen soldier, properly compensate the career force, and allow other essential security work to be done at a reasonable cost to the nation.

A draft would dramatically upgrade the quality of U.S. recruits, because it would give the military access to a true cross-section of our youth. Due to enticing economic and educational alternatives elsewhere, the number of military enlistees who achieve advanced scores on qualifying tests has dropped by a third since the mid 1990s. In fiscal year 2000, the Army actually took in some 380 recruits with felony arrests.

Most telling, over a third of new military members currently fail to complete their enlistments. Contrast this with the one in ten draftees who didn't complete their two-year obligations when we last had a draft. It's much better to have most soldiers serve a short term honorably than to have large cohorts discharged for cause.

A twenty-first-century draft would be based on several principles: 1) Males only, as combat would be a likelihood. Women should be allowed to volunteer as they do now. 2) Active duty should be relatively short—perhaps 18 months. 3) This would be followed by assignment to a part-time Reserve or National Guard unit (the forces that will play a critical role in homeland security). 4) Easy options for alternate but equally demanding civilian service should be provided, thereby accommodating conscientious objectors and individuals who would be poor military performers. Providing airport security is one area where those opting out of military units could be placed. The costs of increased airport security in the new era will be staggering; they



Lawrence Korb

Why fix something that isn't broken? The answer is that we shouldn't.

Nonetheless, two groups advocate a return to a military draft: people who dislike an all-volunteer force, and people who overstate the military demands of a war on terrorism.

Opponents of a volunteer army claim it is too expensive. They assume military costs would drop with a draft because the Pentagon could cut its advertising budget and pay the conscripts subsistence rather than market wages. There is no doubt that military manpower is expensive. This year alone, the Defense Department will spend \$83 billion on military personnel.

But reinstating the draft would actually cost more. The average length of service for a volunteer enlistee is four years; most draft proposals call for no more than a two-year hitch. About half of volunteers re-enlist, while only 10 percent of draftees did so the last time we had a draft. Increased training costs could thus make a mixed draft and volunteer force more expensive than an all-volunteer force.

The point is illustrated when one compares our military personnel costs in the last year we had a draft, 1973, to our current costs. Back 29 years ago, military personnel amounted to 33 percent of the budget. This year, the Pentagon will spend about 25 percent of its budget on military personnel. Admittedly, the force is much smaller. But this evidence suggests that promises of significant savings on military pay amidst a draft may not pan out.

Draft advocates argue that a volunteer force allows the children of elites to avoid military service, and thus breaks the connection between the military and society.

People who hold this view seem to have forgotten how many children of the elite managed to avoid active military service even with a draft.

The truth is, the connection between America and our military is stronger than ever today. Witness the concern among Americans about casualties when our armed forces are sent in harm's way.

Draft proponents used to argue that under a volunteer force the public wouldn't care as much about those who were sent abroad to fight America's wars, since American society at

MOSKOS continued

can be contained only by some form of conscription. Israel currently relies on college-age young adults to do almost all of their airport screening, and they accomplish the job very effectively.

Opponents of the draft argue that the modern military requires a high level of technical skills that cannot be achieved by short-term personnel. Precisely. Higher pay packages should thus be aimed specifically at those career specialists whose skills are most needed, and not squandered on signing bonuses and college aid used in desperation to pull in enough entry-level privates. A two-track pay system could be devised to give long-term enlistees much higher compensation and drafted short-term soldiers much more modest pay.

The need to enhance the compensation of our skilled career force is pressing. We currently overpay new recruits and underpay sergeants, and the result is serious strain. Pay raises and bonuses should be focused on the career force, not on recruits, and this can only be done with conscription. Back when the U.S. had a draft, the pay ratio between a master sergeant and a private

The new costs of increased airport security will be staggering; conscription, among its other good effects, can contain them.

was seven to one; today it is less than three to one. Restoring something like the old balance is the best way to upgrade retention in hard-to-fill skills and leadership positions.

Along with a draft, a major redirection is required in the way federal aid operates in higher education. At present, we've created a GI Bill for people who haven't toiled as GIs. Annually, \$30 billion in federal grants and subsidies goes to students who never serve their country. In the future, only individuals drafted into our military or alternate civilian service should be eligible for federal subsidies for college.

Even with larger active and reserve military forces, and expanded forms of civilian service, only about half of all eligible U.S. males would probably be needed to serve. How then can a draft be equitable? I suggest we start drafting at the top of the social ladder—who better to serve a short term for their country than those benefitting most from living here?

When the children of our nation's elite perform military service for their country, our national interests will be taken much more seriously. If serving one's country becomes commonplace among privileged young men, the future leaders of our civilian life will have a formative citizenship experience at a critical age. This can only be of advantage to our nation.

Northwestern University professor Charles Moskos, a former draftee, is co-author of The Military: More Than Just a Job?

KORB continued

large would not be bearing the burden of military service.

Yet as any politician can tell you, when America's army goes to war today, all of America goes to war. (Remember, the divisive Vietnam War was fought with a draft.)

Our armed services simply do not need everyone. Two million American males turn 18 every year. Since our active and reserve forces currently take in only about 300,000 new recruits annually, it would be a thorny task to decide whom to pass over.

Supporters of a return to conscription often speak of a volunteer army as an aberration. The fact of the matter is, in all U.S. history, there has only been a draft for about 35 years.

Even during the Cold War conscription lasted just 25 years. For the other 30 years of our successful struggle against communism we recruited on an all-volunteer basis.

None of this is meant to argue that the all-volunteer force is a perfect system. It would indeed be better if the nation had a system of universal military service. But, the armed services simply do not need everyone.

Today, our active and reserve forces take in about 300,000 new recruits each year. Meanwhile, some 2 million American men annually turn 18. It would be a thorny task to decide whom to draft and whom to exempt.

Some argue the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington mean this nation should go on a wartime footing, which in our other great wars included a draft. But this war will not be like the war against the Axis powers or the Cold War. In addition to the 1.4 million people on active duty, the U.S. armed forces have some 800,000 reservists.

It is hard to imagine a situation in the war against terrorism that could not be handled by the more than 2 million volunteers already in our forces.

The all-volunteer force has given us the most professional and competent military in our history. Even in the booming economy of the 1990s, it managed to attract and retain high-quality people. Volunteers performed successfully in the Gulf War and are still doing an excellent job in the Balkans and around the globe. They will carry out their missions in the war against terrorism.

Why mess with success?

Former Assistant Secretary of Defense Lawrence Korb is an officer of the Council on Foreign Relations and a retired Navy captain.