

# Why We Still Need the Draft

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The recent political fracas over women and the draft is making headlines around the country and has become a campaign issue in the Republican presidential primaries. But this debate raises even more profound questions about the need for — and value of — the draft more broadly. Put simply, Selective Service is the only remaining thread in American society that ties all U.S. citizens to their military. It links the American people to the nation's wars, and the risks of military service in those wars, through the fundamental responsibility of defending the country when needed. It also continues to serve an often-overlooked but nevertheless important role in protecting American security.

Many Americans are questioning whether the draft remains relevant in the 21st century. Today's U.S. military is widely considered the most advanced, the most powerful, the best-led, and the most capable military in the world. The all-volunteer force has proved both successful and resilient since it was established in 1973, to include the harshest test thus far of its capabilities — the last 15 years of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite the stresses of repeated deployments to highly demanding combat environments, it remained largely well disciplined and effective. Some members of Congress believe that this remarkable performance means that the United States should abolish the draft. Rep. Mike Coffman (R-Colo.), who recently co-sponsored a bill that would do exactly that, explained his position by saying that the "all-volunteer military has given us the most elite fighting force in the history of the country." But those who see the draft as an ineffective or irrelevant artifact of the past are wrong. Three myths dominate their thinking.

*We will never again need a draft. Why are we even having this conversation?* No one can predict the future of war. As former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates once quipped, since the Vietnam War, the United States has a perfect record of predicting the next war: "we have never once gotten it right." As we wrote last month, the U.S. military must remain prepared to fight a really big war that might require a much larger force — which could well require a draft. Even though that scenario remains unlikely, the consequences of being unable to wage such a war could prove disastrous. The Selective Service System also helps serve as a deterrent and a symbol of national will. Deterrence is not only a function of current power; it also includes the nation's potential power when galvanized — military, economic, diplomatic, and even social. Maintaining the mechanism to implement conscription means that in times of crisis, the United States can send an indisputable signal of national resolve by choosing to start a draft, even one of modest size.

*Draftees dilute the quality of the force and diminish military effectiveness.* This inaccurate perspective is a clear legacy of Vietnam. By the end of that war, the U.S. military was plagued by drug abuse, racial tensions, and serious indiscipline. Many

military personnel equate these maladies with conscription — despite the fact that as one of us can personally attest, these problems also plagued much of the first decade of the all-volunteer force. The military's experience with large draft armies in 1917, 1941 and 1953 further demonstrates that this perspective is simply wrong. Draftees performed remarkably well during those wartime periods, perhaps because they were serving in conflicts widely supported by the American people. We now refer to the draftees who served in World War II as "The Greatest Generation." There is no reason to expect that would automatically be any different in the future. And even though only 29 percent of those recently surveyed said that the United States should have a military draft, public opinion could shift quickly — especially in the aftermath of an attack on the United States (terrorist or otherwise) that were to kill tens or even hundreds of thousands of Americans (let alone millions).

*Wars are way too complicated today for anyone but long-serving professionals. Draftees will be useless or worse, disruptive.* Conscription in the future could look very different than the draft calls of Vietnam or Korea, which were designed to provide more infantrymen for the fight. The changing shape of future wars may require conscripting the nation's best experts at code writing, hacking, and cyber security to rapidly build a world-class cadre of cyber warriors. There might be an immediate need to put financial experts and market analysts into uniform to help protect the nation from potentially disruptive economic warfare. Or the military might need to mobilize social media gurus who can help understand and then undercut the insidious messaging of highly sophisticated adversaries aiming to inflame and radicalize populations at home and abroad. These targeted conscripts might also be drafted to be reservists, splitting time between uniformed and civilian jobs and leveraging skills from both. This 21st-century, cutting-edge human capital is unlikely to be found in today's military — yet may prove crucial in a future major war.

These points show that the draft has both a current and future practical role in the nation's defense. Abolishing Selective Service would strip an important arrow from the quiver of American defenses. The prospect of a future draft — even a modest, targeted one — serves as a quiet but important hedge against an unknowable future filled with ever-changing threats to the nation. The United States must always retain an emergency way to respond to existential threats, and if necessary, mobilize parts or all of society in response.

Yet there is an even more profound reason to maintain the Selective Service system: It plays a very important role in linking the American people to military service. Without the possibility of a draft, however remote, the American people will never again have any personal exposure, no intimate skin in the game in the weighty national decision to go to war.

The gap between the American people and their military is growing ever larger, which is the less talked-about downside to the success of the all-volunteer force. Relying on self-selected volunteers to carry the nation's burden of going to war has slowly become an accepted norm, somewhat like the roles of firefighters and police. Most Americans

believe it is perfectly acceptable for those who volunteer to fight for the nation to do so — others need not concern themselves, and don't. They have effectively outsourced war to others — the sons and daughters of military families, rural youngsters from the south and west, high school students looking toward generous G.I. Bill benefits — all volunteers admirably wanting to serve their country.

But this outlook is deeply unhealthy for the nation. It is morally wrong to shift the nation's only exposure to large-scale mortal risk in defending our society onto only a handful of fellow citizens. That responsibility belongs to all of us. It is a fundamental tenet of the American experiment in democracy that all citizens share the burdens of defending the nation in times of crisis. We let that long-held touchstone of American citizenship disappear at great risk. Once gone, the will and ability to mobilize the larger nation to fight — even when necessary — would be immensely hard to resurrect, both practically and philosophically.

Selective Service preserves a slender thread connecting the American people to the force of arms, to society's momentous and always-deadly decision to go to war. Maintaining mechanisms for a draft also provides a strategic "shock absorber" so that the country can mobilize parts or all of society in an existential crisis. Absent the possibility of a draft, Americans will grow ever more distant from the military, from the debates by their elected leaders on the use of force, from the need to think about America's changing role in a dangerous world, and most importantly, from personally sharing the risks of war. The distance today between those who fight and those who ultimately send them to war has grown substantially in the last decade and a half. Maintaining Selective Service is a small but important way to ensure it grows no wider.

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