



NATIONAL COMMISSION ON MILITARY, NATIONAL, AND
PUBLIC SERVICE

Stand-Alone Memo for Voting

This memo presents a foundational finding. This proposal was discussed, but not endorsed, by the full Commission. This proposal is designed for consideration in its entirety and is subject to a single vote.

Mandatory service for all Americans. *Problem:* The United States is challenged by a lack of social cohesion, poor civic engagement, and/or unmet needs. *Goal:* Mitigate these challenges by requiring a term of mandatory service for all Americans.

- The Commission recommends that Congress pass legislation to require a term of mandatory service from all Americans to be completed between ages 18 and 30. This service term would be a minimum of one year in a form of service of the participant's choosing.

Risk Analysis

- While mandatory service programs are used with varying degrees of success throughout the international community, this proposal remains untested and controversial in the United States. **Public and political support** for the program will vary widely.
- The **fiscal costs** of this policy would be substantial due to significant investments in infrastructure and bureaucracy to manage such a program, compensation requirements for an annual cohort of approximately 4 million people, and opportunity costs of placing young people in service rather than education or the workforce.
- The **social costs** of this policy may include the perception of infringement on the individual right to self-determination, delayed accumulation of human capital among young people, and other potential negative social effects associated with imposing a required year of service on all Americans.
- The **Department of Defense** will likely oppose any program requiring it to accept personnel it does not deem eligible.
- This proposal will certainly face **legal challenge**.

Should this proposal be adopted?

Mandatory Service for All Americans

- Mandatory service would require every American to engage in service at some point during their life.

Background

The idea of a mandatory service program has appeared in the political landscape many times since the early 20th century and has garnered much interest and debate. Typically, the two forms of mandatory service considered are mandatory national service or mandatory military service (that is, conscription) for all Americans. Conscription has been used throughout U.S. military history since the colonial era, but the United States has never required all Americans to serve. Internationally, nations such as Israel require military service of nearly all Israelis, though some are allowed to perform alternative service through exemptions.

Mandatory national service was first popularized in 1910 in “The Moral Equivalent of War” by William James as a means to maintain social cohesiveness and inculcate civic responsibility and other positive values in young adults.¹ Legislation that would require service of all Americans has been introduced several times during the 20th and 21st centuries. Notably, the Universal National Service Act was proposed in 2003, 2006, 2007, 2010, and 2013 by Rep. Charles Rangel.²

Findings

- Advocates for mandatory service present four categories of arguments of the benefits of such a program: (1) “social glue,” (2) civic engagement, (3) satisfying unmet needs, and (4) civic responsibility.³
 - Proponents, such as Brennan and Upshaw, argue that American society is increasingly stratified and diverse and that service is a means by which people, particularly young people, can be acculturated through service that binds Americans together across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines to solve common problems.⁴
 - Proponents suggest mandatory service might motivate youth to grapple with social issues and engage in their communities throughout their lives through early exposure to the community during a service term.⁵
 - Advocates argue that service already helps address needs throughout the nation, but the limited scale of current programs, specifically national service programs, prevents more effective responses to challenges.⁶

¹ Michael W. Sherraden, *National Service: Social, Economic, and Military Impacts* (Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press, 1982).

² For example, see U.S. House of Representatives, *Universal National Service Act*, H.R. 748, 113th Congress, 1st sess., 2013.

³ Robert E. Litan, “The Obligations of September 11, 2001,” in *United We Serve: National Service and the Future of Citizenship*, ed. E.J. Dionne Jr., Kayla Meltzer Drogosz, Robert E. Litan (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2003).

⁴ Matthew S. Brennan and Kyle L. Upshaw, “American Service: New National Service for the United States” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2012).

⁵ Rebecca Nesbit and Jeffrey L. Brudney, “At Your Service? Volunteering and National Service in 2020.” *Public Administration Review* 70 (December 2010), 107-113.

⁶ Litan, “The Obligations of September 11, 2001.”

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- Finally, mandatory service could reinforce the idea that citizenship is earned, rather than given, and that citizenship not only involves privileges but also responsibilities. This argument stems from research that suggests service promotes these attitudes.⁷
- Those who oppose mandatory service argue that it: (1) is antithetical to American values of liberty, (2) would be ineffective at achieving stated goals, and (3) is economically and fiscally inefficient.
 - Opponents of mandatory service argue that Americans should not be *required* to do more than what they have historically be required to do under the Constitution: obey the law, pay taxes, and respond to jury summons and military service if called upon.⁸
 - Opponents argue that mandatory service might erode the American tendency toward voluntary service, disillusion young people toward the value of service and government, and potentially reduce propensity for service even among those with the desire to serve.⁹
 - Economists have argued that mandatory service would have several negative economic effects: opportunity cost to conscripts, lost labor inputs in other sectors of the economy, inefficient match between skills and jobs, lower productivity, overreliance on conscripts for labor, and delayed human capital accumulation.¹⁰
- The legal case for universal service is debatable. Some argue that universal service would violate the Thirteenth Amendment’s prohibition on involuntary servitude. Unlike military conscription, no court has considered whether universal service of any kind would be permissible under the Constitution. This option would certainly face legal challenge.¹¹
- The practicality of a universal service system is considered a tremendous challenge, even to advocates. In his testimony to the Commission, William Galston said he supports universal obligation in principle, but he does not “regard it as practical. We simply do not have the resources, human or material, to administer such a system in circumstances other than the kinds of emergencies that call for national mobilizations.”¹²

⁷ Gregory B. Markus, Jeffrey P. F. Howard, and David C. King, "Integrating Community Service and Classroom Instruction Enhances Learning: Results from an Experiment," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 15, no. 4 (Winter 1993), 410, doi:10.2307/1164538.

⁸ Brennan and Upshaw, "American Service: New National Service for the United States."

⁹ Michael Lind, "A Solution in Search of a Problem," in *United We Serve: National Service and the Future of Citizenship*, ed. E.J. Dionne Jr., Kayla Meltzer Drogosz, Robert E. Litan (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2003); see also, Sara E. Helms, "Involuntary Volunteering: The Impact of Mandated Service in Public Schools," *Economics of Education Review* 36, (June 26, 2013), 295-310.

¹⁰ Morten I. Lau, Panu Poutvaara, and Andreas Wagener, "Dynamic Costs of the Draft," *German Economic Review* 5, no. 4 (2004), 381-406; see also, Walter Oi, "The Economic Costs of the Draft," *The American Economic Review* 57, no. 2 (May 1967), 39-62; see also, Joshua D. Angrist, Stacey H. Chen, and Jae Song, "Long-term Consequences of Vietnam-Era Conscription: New Estimates Using Social Security Data," *American Economic Review* 101, no. 3 (2011), 334-38.

¹¹ Doug Bandow, [Testimony to the Commission](#).

¹² William Galston, [Testimony to the Commission](#).

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- This policy assumes that sufficient positions could be generated across the service spectrum for every American, regardless of preexisting skill, ability, and disposition.

Recommendations and Implementation

For the purposes of deliberation, the italicized text serves as the foundation for potential recommendations and should be the focus of decision-making. Detailed descriptions of how to implement recommended changes are offered to illustrate a means of achieving the desired outcomes.

- *The Commission recommends that Congress pass legislation that requires all Americans to participate in military, national, or public service for a term no less than one year between the ages of 18 and 30.*
- *The Commission recommends that Congress determine appropriate penalties for failure to comply with the universal service obligation.*
- *The Commission recommends that Congress authorize and appropriate such funds as necessary to implement a program of universal service for all Americans.*