“National Service:” A Draft in Camouflage

Members of Congress who want the draft, but who are afraid of draft resistance, have for years been calling for a National Service program for young people. One version of the plan is to eliminate all Federal educational grants and loans and replace them with aid to reward only those who “volunteer” for military or civilian government “service.” National service would be an attack on the right to education, and one more step in the militarization of American society.

What About Draft Registration?

Draft registration has failed. The government started registration in 1980 to see whether young people would cooperate with a return to a draft. We didn’t. Millions of people resisted.

The call for draft registration sparked a grass-roots movement of opposition. Anti-draft groups formed in hundreds of communities and colleges.

So many people refused to register that the government could neither bring back the draft nor prosecute more than a tiny fraction of the nonregistrants. Nobody has been prosecuted for refusing to register since 1986.

Many who registered only did so because they thought they would go to jail if they didn’t. They don’t want to fight, they don’t want to be drafted, and many will resist if there is a draft.

We Can Resist the Draft Now!

People who oppose the wars need to be ready to respond when debate on a draft begins in Congress. We need to make politicians and the public aware that any draft would be so widely resisted as to be unenforceable.

We need to convince legislators that voting for the draft could cost them reelection. We need to convince Congress, the President, and the Pentagon that neither suppressing nor ignoring draft resistance will be politically safe.

We need to network with each other, make contingency plans, and make sure the government knows we’re ready and willing to resist any draft.

Refusing to register, “unregistering” by moving without telling the Selective Service System, or refusing induction are not the only ways to resist the draft. Men in the anti-draft movement forget this too often. Here are some of the other ways that men and women of all ages can resist the draft:

- Don’t tell Selective Service where you are. Don’t report for induction. Encourage others not to go.
- Encourage and support soldiers who refuse to fight, as well as young people and medical workers to refuse to be drafted. Support those who desert the military, who mutiny, who fraternize with the “enemy.” Let your children and other young people and health care workers know that you support their resistance to the draft.
- Expose and shame local draft board members. (Draft boards have been appointed for every county in the U.S.)
- Write letters to Congress and post on your social media. Let people know that you’ll resist and support others who resist — whether or not you’re drafted yourself.
- Organize an anti-draft group in your school, health care facility, youth or parent group, or community. Hold a teach-in. Hand out a leaflet. Speak out now!

Visit our Web site for more information:

www.Resisters.info

(Updated March 2021. See Web site for latest info.)
Why Worry About the Draft?

The draft is a threat to everyone concerned about peace — not just young men. The more soldiers the generals have, the more soldiers and civilians they can kill — and without a draft, the U.S. military is eventually going to run short of “volunteer” soldiers for its endless wars!

Some people think that only young men can resist the draft. But that’s not true at all. The people most likely to face the draft first are doctors, nurses, and other health care workers — men and women up to age 45 in 57 different occupations.

Some people think they would be safe from the draft because they are college students or plan to seek conscientious objector (CO) status. But student deferments have been abolished, most people who oppose wars don’t qualify for CO status, and many valid CO claims will be denied.

Politicians know the draft would produce widespread dissent and resistance. The higher the domestic costs of the draft look, the more likely politicians are to seek an end to the wars. Fear of the draft will encourage them to get the troops out of Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and the Gulf before the recruiting crisis gets any worse.

Of course, even without a draft the U.S. invaded Panama, Grenada, Afghanistan, and Iraq and sent the “contras” to Nicaragua and the “mujahideen” (who would later become the Taliban and Al Qaeda) into Afghanistan. But with a draft supplying even more soldiers, each of those wars would have been even bloodier.

Sooner or later, the government will need a draft to fight more, longer, and/or larger wars, or to continue to maintain an occupation force in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Gulf. If enough people resist this attempt to bring back the draft, we can force a long-term cutback in the size of the military, and help bring the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries to an end sooner and with less bloodshed.

Does the U.S. Need a Draft to Fight These Wars?

Since the Pentagon has a million “volunteers” to send to Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Gulf, why would they want a draft? The answer is: eventually, they won’t have a choice. Even a relatively brief but bloody outbreak of total war would require a Doctor Draft. Longer-term occupations will eventually require a full-scale draft. Whatever happens, these wars may give the government an excuse to create a coercive National Service program that channels young people into the military.

A New “Doctor Draft”

The peacetime U.S. Army doesn’t have very many doctors, nurses, or medical technicians. Most of those in the military are in the Reserves, subject to call-up for indefinite active duty at any time. During the 1990-1991 Gulf War, even retired physician assistants were called back to active duty — the first time in 30 years that any retired soldiers had been recalled. As early as 2004, the New England Journal of Medicine reported that casualties in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had created a severe shortage of military surgeons. Extended call-ups of reservists make other potential new Reservists less willing to sign up.

The military can’t fight wars without doctors. During past wars there was a special “Doctor Draft” with a higher age limit and fewer deferments. Many doctors have objected to being forced to serve in the military.

People go into health care careers because they care about saving lives. But military medical workers are supposed to patch up wounded soldiers, so that they can go back to the front to fight (and perhaps kill) other soldiers. Some doctors don’t think that’s what their Hippocratic Oath to preserve life is all about. During the 1990-1991 Gulf War, some active-duty and Reserve doctors refused orders to the Gulf, and civilian health care workers began preparing for a draft and organized a health care workers’ pledge against militarism and the draft.

The Selective Service System has had contingency plans for a Health Care Personnel Delivery System in place since the 1980’s. As the wars and the casualties continue and escalate, a doctor draft could start quickly. No draft registration will probably be needed, since in the past the AMA and some other professional associations have arranged to provide licensing lists to Selective Service as a pool of potential draftees.

The military needs all kinds of medical professionals, so a new “Doctor Draft” will probably include men and women who are nurses, medical technicians, etc. as well as physicians. Health care workers need to start thinking now about what they’ll do if they are drafted — and what they can do now to prevent the draft.

A “Cannon Fodder” Draft

Since the 1980s, resistance to draft registration has prevented the draft and forced the government to rely on a “poverty draft” and, more recently, on mercenaries (“security contractors”).

The Pentagon has substantial recruiting shortfalls in some specialties including information technology and foreign languages — occupations in which it’s hard for the military to recruit people away from civilian jobs.

Who knows how many more Americans will come home from these wars in body bags or with lifetime disabilities from improvised explosives. No matter how desperately they need a job, young people won’t keep volunteering to “find their future in the Army” while this is happening.

People aren’t likely to volunteer for endless desert occupation duty in hostile countries. If the occupations continue or get bloodier, or the U.S. wars expand to more countries, the Pentagon will eventually need a draft.