HAPPY BIRTHDAY FROM UNCLE SAM

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For the last fifty years, every male in the United States has celebrated his eighteenth birthday with Uncle Sam. On this day, they are obligated by law to go to their local post office and fill out the Selective Service forms that register them for the draft. These actions are the result of a law known as the Selective Service Act.

The Selective Service Act's provision regarding draft registration violates a two hundred year-old tradition of not operating a draft during peacetime. It is morally wrong to waste millions of dollars a year on an unneeded and ineffective system. Also, it is extremely important to note that one source states inductees could be delivered only shortly after the draftees of our present system. The draft system blatantly discriminates between genders because women are not included. Furthermore, it violates the rights of those who are religiously and ethically opposed to war.

To understand how this system has evolved, we must look at the past uses of the draft. The draft was used for the first time in 1863, when President Lincoln signed the Enrollment Act. The Civil War Draft Act inducted less than ten percent of the 3,122,300 men they enrolled (Kiernan 67). The low induction rate stemmed from the many reasons that constituted exemptions. For example, Americans became familiar with the phrase "a rich man's war and a poor man's fight" because a wealthy man could easily purchase an exemption for three hundred dollars, or hire a substitute (President's 159). This was the first time religion or moral and ethical standards were given consideration, but religious exemptions were cut entirely when the need for more men increased.

The draft was reinstated during World War I, and over 2.8 million troops were called to Europe. The peacetime draft was first enacted in 1940 and met with some disapproval from the people. During the Vietnam conflict, a 1965 Supreme Court decision, in Seeger vs. U.S., broadened the definition of a conscientious objector and allowed for personal beliefs, not based on religion, to justify an exemption. This ruling also allowed for objection to particular wars based on personal moral codes.

In 1993, the Department of Defense issued a report stating that "Peacetime registration could be suspended with no effect on military mobilization, little effect on the time it would take to mobilize, and no measurable effect on military recruitment" (Congressional Record H3866).

However, President Clinton and his former Secretary of Defense, Les Aspen, have conducted a review of the Selective Service System and draft regulation and concluded it was necessary (H3866). President Clinton was quoted by the Congressional Record as saying the following:

This is a low-cost insurance policy against our underestimating the maximum level of threat we expect our Armed Forces to face. Terminating the Selective Service and
draft registration now would send the wrong signal to our potential enemies who are watching for signs of U.S. weakness. (H3867)

These are strong words from a man who clearly took steps to avoid serving in Vietnam. The significance of these words would be far greater were they spoken by William Perry, the current Secretary of Defense, whose entire career has been in the area of defense. Mr. Perry's position is to the contrary. He claims that "suspending peacetime registration could be accomplished with limited risk to national security, considering the low probability of the need for conscription" (Should 10). Apparently, Mr. Perry has observed something that President Clinton has not--the Cold War is over.

The difference in positions expressed by President Clinton and Secretary of Defense Perry is just one of the many contested issues connected to the debate about Selective Service. Another contested area involves the data dealing with the actual time of mobilization, with or without the draft. According to Representative Pickle of Texas, if the Selective Service System were eliminated, "it would take three months to a year to reactivate the system of putting draftees into uniform. With the present system, it would only take thirteen days after a draft law is passed to mobilize readiness" (Congressional Record H3868). The Selective Service itself has found that the first draftee could be produced thirteen days after mobilization. They also have stated that without advance registration, they could begin delivery of inductees in as little as seventeen days after mobilization (Drinan 14). Clearly, the Selective Service is a better judge of its capabilities than a member of the House of Representatives who must deal with hundreds of issues.

In December of 1978, President Jimmy Carter took a number of diplomatic steps to show his outrage over the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. One of these steps was to require the registration for the military of all males on their eighteenth birthdays. There is a ninety-eight to ninety-nine percent compliance with these laws, and our eighteen year-old men are not complaining (CR H3867). However, we need only to look back to the late 'sixties or early 'seventies to see the extent to which young men voiced their resistance to being drafted to go to Vietnam. What they are not complaining about is making a trip to the post office.

Since these actions were taken, we have thrown away millions of dollars on this still-accepted policy of registration. Senator Mark O. Hatfield, a Republican from Oregon, states that in the year 1994 alone, twenty-five million dollars will be spent on this program (Should 10). Another source reports that not requiring the registration of all eighteen year-old males would save up to ten million dollars a year (Drinan 14). A layman could not sort out the accuracy of these figures. It would probably take an accountant with access to the records of the Office of the Budget to calculate the actual costs. Regardless of whose figures you believe, this is a wasted multi-million dollar program because we are only gaining three days in the mobilization process.

It is required by law that registrants report address changes to the Selective Service, but a study done by the General Accounting Office finds that eighty-five percent of the registrants are not doing so. They also later reported that "twenty-seven million dollars in 1991 alone is too great of a price to pay for continuing to send Carter's 'message' to an
‘addressee’ who no longer exists” (Decrepit 24). This is just another example of the extravagant wastefulness in the Selective Service System.

Allowing conscription does not affect a large part of the population. The men who are legally forced to fight in these wars range from seventeen to fifty-one, but “ninety percent of the casualties are among men under twenty-six and seventy-five percent of the casualties are in the nineteen to twenty-three age group” (Reeves 67). The men most likely to die represent about five percent of the male population. Therefore, we can look at war with conscription as a "young man's battle imposed by old men's mistakes" (67).

This exclusive club of victims does not even allow women. A rising number of Americans believe that the Selective Service Act is unconstitutional because it does not treat men and women equally. It is believed by the National Organization for Women that “excluding women from this act emphasizes their inferior role in American society” (Kiernan 68). There are many men who register for the draft but are not called to serve because a medical examiner does not feel they are qualified to fight in a war. The important factor to consider, then, is not difference in gender but the ability to perform in a combat situation.

Seeing the need to eliminate conscription, on March 27, 1969, President Nixon “appointed an Advisory Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force under the chairmanship of the Honorable Thomas S. Gates, Jr., former Secretary of Defense” (President's, intro.). This commission was faced with the task of increasing the number of volunteers for service. To do so, they wanted to make joining the armed forces more rewarding by increasing pay and benefits. This is significant because it occurred at the height of the Vietnam War when resistance to the draft was strongest. Even during a war period, President Nixon was responding to the public pressure to end an unjust system.

Prior to 1948, except during major wars, our country has been protected by a volunteer armed force. Changing to an all-volunteer force would have the following advantages for us as a nation of people possessing a common heritage: first, it would recognize that our young people are patriotic and willing to defend this country and our constitution without being forced to do so. It is an insult to all Americans that we, as a nation, do not appreciate the uniqueness of our society enough to voluntarily defend it. Conscription implies that we have to be forced to stand for, and behind, the beliefs and principles embodied in our constitution. An all-volunteer military promotes the efficiency of the armed forces because it eliminates the presence of those men who do not want to be there and are just waiting for their enlistment to end. These two factors have the combined effect of enhancing the dignity of the people in the military, as well as the perception of their dignity by the non-military population. A government that does not force conscription shows that it respects the freedom of its citizens to determine their own lifestyles and career choices. A government that has a peace-time draft and a system in place to begin drafting men involuntarily is in blatant conflict with a constitution that guarantees life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. One time candidate for President and long time South Dakota Senator George McGovern states the following:

A nation founded on human liberty and individual dignity, and peopled in good part by escapees from compulsion in other lands, should have a natural distaste for conscription. We have, in fact, decided once through the devastation of civil war that freedom and involuntary servitude cannot co-exist. On principle the draft is as
foreign as anything can be to the ideals we profess as a free, libertarian society (Reeves xiii).

Works Cited


