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IS IT TIME TO MANDATE VOLUNTEERISM?

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This October, the U.S. Army successfully met its annual recruiting goal by bringing in 80,000 new soldiers for fiscal year 2007. This accomplishment, however, necessitated the offering of a \$20,000 bonus to ship out immediately, depleted the delayed-entry pool of next year's recruits to make this year's mission, and required the relaxing of standards in the areas of high school graduation, criminal background, and mental aptitude. The next few years will be even more of a challenge as the Army increases its strength by 28,000 soldiers by 2010.

In just about any discussion concerning the severe challenges of recruiting an all-volunteer force, the notion of a draft as a solution is bound to emerge. Proponents of a draft point out that, in addition to making the military's current recruiting difficulties moot, a draft would spread the burden of war across a larger body of citizens. That body of citizens would include the children of the elite—to include the sons and daughters of politicians who make the decisions in taking our country to war. A national draft, according to this line of thinking, would prevent a cavalier approach to committing our armed forces by ensuring that society in general and the elites in particular would have a personal stake in the decision to go to war.

The reasoning behind a draft makes sense, as far as distributing the onus of military service across all of society, since a fairly administered draft would give all eligible citizens an equal chance of being called upon. The impact on actual political decisionmaking, however, would be muted because the evenly distributed chance of being drafted would be surprisingly low. A quick analysis of the actual numbers involved reveals that the institution of a draft would not significantly affect the vested interests of American elites in decisions involving war.

For example, of 300 million American citizens, about 15 million are males between the ages of 18 to 24 (this example focuses on males—the analysis becomes even more telling when females are included). Because of requirements in mental aptitude, high school graduation, criminal background, body weight, or physical issues, about a third of this population is unqualified to join the military. That leaves about 10 million males eligible for a draft. The current recruiting mission for the active duty, Guard, and Reserve military is about 320,000 people. If the military significantly increased the

annual accessions requirement on the order of three times the current amount (and we naively assume that the military could expand to take in the increase in personnel), about one million males would be drafted. While putting one million males into uniform is noteworthy, it is only 10 percent of the eligible population of 18 to 24-year-old males – a far cry from spreading the burden of war across society.

An alternative to a pure draft is compulsory national service with military duty as one option among several. This course of action is appealing because it broadens the concept of service beyond the military. While the notion of mobilizing America's young people en masse to serve the greater good is extremely alluring, once again, the actual numbers involved show how difficult this would be. For example, AmeriCorps—a network of local, state, and national service programs filling needs in areas such as education, the environment, public safety, and homeland security—enlists about 75,000 young people a year. Even if AmeriCorps quadrupled in size, it would affect only 1 percent of all 18 to 24-year-olds in the nation.

Germany provides an interesting case study of a draft as part of compulsory national service. Males are required to spend 9 months in the military or perform alternative civilian service such as disaster relief or ambulance services. Because of the low demand for soldiers, however, less than half of all eligible males actually enter the military (more than a third are screened out for medical reasons). As a result, compulsory national service—an idea raised in the United States because of a desire to bring equity in determining who serves in the military—has ironically led to debates in Germany about *Wehrgerechtigkeit* or “draft equity.”

Despite the insurmountable difficulties involved in actually executing a draft or compulsory national service program, those concepts continually emerge as potential solutions to a societal concern. That concern goes beyond bringing more accountability into the decision to deploy our troops (which may be better accomplished through more active involvement of the legislative branch) or providing opportunities for young people to serve (which already exist through organizations such as AmeriCorps or the National Civilian Community Corps). The concern traces its roots to a deeper apprehension that American individualism—a key virtue in our social fabric—is overtaking any felt obligation to serve society. In other words, American society is becoming dominated by individual self-interest rather than the desire to serve others.

It has not, however, always been this way. Alexis de Tocqueville, the French commentator on American democracy, wrote in 1835 of the American “principle of self-interest rightly understood.” He observed:

The Americans, on the other hand, are fond of explaining almost all the actions of their lives by the principle of self-interest rightly understood; they show with complacency how an enlightened regard for themselves constantly prompts them to assist one another and inclines them willingly to sacrifice a portion of their time and property to the welfare of the state.

Tocqueville recognized that American citizens of that day lived by the principle of self-interest, but it was the principle of self-interest *rightly understood*. People during that period operated under the realization that citizens who acted to further the interests of

society ultimately served their own self-interest through the betterment of the society in which they lived. Part of the uniqueness of America, as observed by Tocqueville, was that individualism was kept in balance by the principle of self-interest rightly understood. Today, that balance appears to be slipping.

The principle of self-interest rightly understood, however, cannot be restored by fiat or programs. Requiring mandatory volunteer hours for high school students, handing out “community service” sentences to celebrity wrong-doers, and even implementing a draft or compulsory national service program only serve to address the symptoms of a much deeper issue. America needs to discuss and debate the responsibilities of being a citizen in a democracy. As a society, we have gradually learned to major in our individual rights and minor in our obligations of being a citizen. In our zeal in chasing the American dream, we have neglected the American spirit. Restoring the principle of self-interest rightly understood must come from within the citizenry. It must come, as Tocqueville noted, from within the community—the family, houses of worship, and education. Unfortunately this task will be much more difficult and take much longer than merely imposing volunteerism from above. It is a task, however, that demands our attention now.

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