

Who Will Serve?

Fraught with profound questions about the obligations of citizenship, conscription has been a controversial issue at crucial moments in the American past. During the Vietnam War, the draft was almost as much an object of protest as the conflict itself. Then, a quarter-century ago, conscription ceased. Our author takes a look back.

by Andrew J. Bacevich

Twenty-five years ago, the draft—an institution that had turned white-hot with controversy as it sucked Americans into an unpopular war—came to an end. President Richard M. Nixon, citing America’s “continuing commitment to the maximum freedom for the individual,” had announced in 1970 his intention to end it. Three years later, he made good on that promise: draft calls fell to zero, and stayed there. Acting in the waning moments of a war that had bitterly divided the country, the president had seemingly bowed to the will of the people. He had even claimed that his decision to end conscription would “demonstrate to the world the responsiveness of republican government.”

It did nothing of the kind. Matching the temper of the times, the president’s motives for reverting to an all-volunteer military were devious and cynical. For Nixon, terminating the draft had little to do with national security, still less with democratic politics. It was merely a matter of tactics. By lifting from student protesters the threat of being compelled to fight in a war they hated, he hoped to bring quiet to American campuses and thus gain more time to extricate the United States from Vietnam with a modicum of national dignity.

The results of the maneuver were mixed. The antiwar movement did collapse soon thereafter. “It was as if someone had flicked a light switch,” observed the acerbic Chicago columnist Mike Royko. “Presto, the throbbing social conscience that had spread across America went limp.” Without the threat of involuntary military service, said Royko, “about 99.9 percent of those who had sobbed over napalm, Christmas bombings and man’s inhumanity to man suddenly began looking for jobs on Wall Street.” Yet Nixon’s hopes for “peace with honor” in Vietnam would go unfulfilled, foundering on the shoals of Watergate.

The more lasting impact of the end to the draft, however, would be on the American military. For the rest of the 1970s and through the 1980s, the all-volunteer force struggled to achieve maturity, finally succeeding just as the Cold War reached its conclusion and Saddam Hussein’s armored columns rolled into Kuwait.

Saddam’s gamble set the stage for one of history’s more lopsided military victories. The spectacular performance of American forces during Operation Desert Storm retroactively transformed Nixon’s decision to jettison the draft from a calculating ploy into a visionary act of leadership. For the first time



These Boston-area men were among the first drafted in late 1940 under the new Selective Service program.

in its history, the United States had fought a major war with a thoroughly professional military establishment—and the stunning outcome silenced the skeptics.

The Persian Gulf War convinced Americans that the United States henceforth should rely principally on regular forces to implement national security policy. Highly skilled and disciplined, experienced professionals appeared precisely suited to the needs of the world's only superpower, with interests spanning the globe. Uncomfortable memories of Vietnam remained sufficiently fresh—in universities, editorial offices, and, most notably, the Clinton White House—to suppress any inclination to think otherwise.

So the United States has embraced the modern-day equivalent of what the Founding Fathers would have recognized as a “standing army.” The question of “who will serve,” formerly a source of recurrent controversy, has now been answered to the apparent satisfaction of all.

That answer has endowed the United States with the most powerful armed forces in the world. Yet past disputes over “who will serve” were never about military requirements and capabilities alone. They were linked inextricably to larger questions about

the meaning of democracy and the nature of democratic citizenship. For that very reason, those passionate but now little-remembered debates about conscription, the regulation of state militias, and the comparative effectiveness of regulars and citizen-soldiers deserve to be pondered today.

I

In the turbulent period after the Revolution, American political leaders enunciated with minimal controversy principles that would form a permanent basis for military policy. Consistent with well-established practice from the colonial era, lessons drawn from the War of Independence, and a firm belief that standing armies were antithetical to liberty, the Founders decided that the people themselves—that is, a militia composed of all free male citizens—would defend the new nation. It was the “embattled farmers,” after all, who—according to the mythology born in the Revolution—had almost single-handedly defeated the British and secured American independence.

Inevitably, the truth was a bit more complicated. “To place any reliance upon mili-

tia, is, assuredly, resting upon a broken staff,” an exasperated George Washington had warned the Continental Congress as early as September 1776. Although his Continentals were few in number—at their peak not more than 16,800—their contribution to final victory, secured not only in battles such as Saratoga and Yorktown but by their very survival as the approximation of a regular army, was incalculable. Moreover, the spirit of volunteerism so much in evidence at Lexington and Concord in 1775 soon began to wane.

The next year, beginning with Massachusetts, states began resorting to compulsion to replenish the diminished ranks of their militias. To fill congressionally assigned quotas for recruits for the Continental Army, most states employed a system of indirect conscription. Typically, local officials would draft an affluent citizen who would in turn hire a substitute. As a result, those who bore the brunt of the fighting in Washington’s beleaguered army were, in the words of one historian, “the sons of marginal farmers, laborers, drifters, and indentured servants,” as well as recent immigrants.

Still, at war’s end, the myth of the minuteman had prevailed, so that even Washington himself paid it obeisance. “It must be laid down as a primary position and the basis of our system,” he wrote in 1783, “that every Citizen who enjoys the protection of a free Government, owes not only a portion of his property, but even of his personal services to the defense of it.” Acknowledging that “a *large* standing Army in time of peace hath ever been considered dangerous to the liberties of a Country,” he would venture only that “a few Troops, under certain circumstances, are not only safe, but indispensably necessary.” But the general had no illusion that a handful of regulars would suffice to defend the republic. That burden belonged to the people.

The other Founders concurred: the imperatives of responsible citizenship and a lively concern for the preservation of liberty demanded reliance on a citizens’ army. The willingness of citizens to accept the burdens of military service, said Secretary of War

Henry Knox in 1786, was a measure of the moral health of the republic. “When public spirit is despised, and avarice, indolence, and effeminacy of manner predominate,” he maintained, the temptation to entrust the security of the nation to hirelings and mercenaries grows. In a republic of virtue, citizens rely upon themselves for collective defense.

Those were not mere words. The Militia Act of 1792, which formed the cornerstone of American military policy for more than a century, required “every free able-bodied white male citizen” between the ages of 18 and 45 to enroll in the militia. It also specified that the “rules of discipline” established by Congress would apply to the military establishments of the several states, presumably ensuring that when called into federal service, the militias would be prepared to fight. On paper at least, the legislation created a mighty host, well suited to the needs of a small republic happily isolated from the rivalries and strife of the Old World.

In practice, though, the result left much to be desired. The new nation was neither as peaceable nor as insulated from Great Power politics as it imagined. The early republic’s small regular army sufficed for routine functions, but it was not adequate for even the slightest emergency. The host of forces produced by the Militia Act of 1792 was little more than a “phantom citizen army,” in historian T. Harry Williams’s phrase. Called into active service, militia units were notoriously undisciplined, ill equipped, and poorly trained. The men balked at lengthy campaigns far from home, and when assigned tasks not to their liking, responded halfheartedly or not at all.

Confronting military requirements for which the militias were ill-suited—as in both the War of 1812 and the Mexican War—the United States had to improvise armies. The preferred method was to raise large numbers of volunteers who could be hastily equipped and given a semblance of training before being dispatched into battle, where fervor and sheer numbers would presumably offset lack of skill. But, of course, in

> ANDREW J. BACEVICH is executive director of the Foreign Policy Institute at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C. Copyright © 1998 by Andrew J. Bacevich.

an unpopular or unsuccessful war, sufficient numbers of volunteers might not be forthcoming, and the government would be forced to consider more coercive methods.

In late 1814, for example, near the end of the War of 1812, President James Madison, beguiled by the prospect of invading Canada (an earlier attempt had failed abysmally), announced his intention to create a new expeditionary army. Its ranks, some 70,000 strong, would be filled, if necessary, through conscription. Justifying the proposed requirement of involuntary service for the sake of a dubious land grab, Secretary of War James Monroe asserted that the “Commonwealth has a right to the service of all its citizens.”

This attempt to convert civic obligation into government prerogative provoked a powerful dissent from Representative Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, a state opposed to continuation of the war. Speaking in Congress on December 9, 1814, Webster pointed out that while the Constitution empowers Congress to raise military forces solely to “repel invasion, suppress insurrection, or execute the laws,” the conscription bill would draft citizens “for the general objects of war—for defending ourselves, or invading others, as may be thought expedient;—not for a sudden emergency, or for a short time, but for long stated periods.” Is this arbitrary power “consistent with the character of a free government?” Webster asked. “No, Sir,” he said, “indeed, it is not. . . . Who will show me any constitutional injunction, which makes it the duty of the American people to surrender every thing valuable in life, and even life itself, not when the safety of their country and its liberties may demand the sacrifice, but whenever the purposes of an ambitious and mischievous Government may require it? . . . [S]uch an abominable doctrine has no foundation in the Constitution of the country.”

Before Congress completed action on Madison’s proposal, the war ended, and Andrew Jackson’s victory at New Orleans restored some luster to the reputation of the citizen-volunteer. But the profound issues Webster had raised—the relationship between individual liberty and civic duty, and the government’s asserted but untested authority to compel citizens to bear arms for

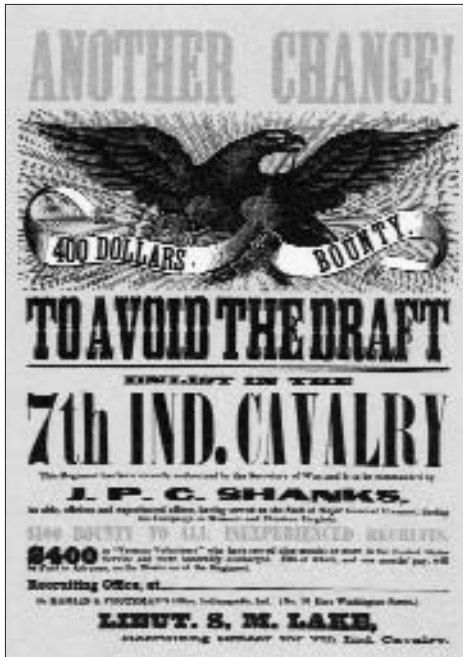
purposes other than immediate defense—remained unresolved.

Nationalists rejected Webster’s thesis on pragmatic grounds. The country’s interests were rapidly expanding, and the government needed to be able to protect and advance them, not just repel invasions and put down insurrections. Nationalists also objected to the radical individualism lurking in Webster’s critique. For example, Representative John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, speaking in 1816, insisted that freedom “mainly stands on the faithful discharge of the two great duties which every citizen of proper age owes the republic: a wise and virtuous exercise of the right of suffrage; and a prompt and brave defense of the country in the hour of danger. The first symptom of decay has ever appeared in the backward and negligent discharge of the latter duty.” Citizens who left to others the defense of their country were themselves unworthy of freedom.

II

During the Civil War, although by no means for the last time in American history, opposition to conscription as an illicit assertion of government power reasserted itself with a vengeance. The Civil War was a contest of massive amateur armies led by a handful of professionals. With the attack on Fort Sumter, volunteers rushed to enlist in the newly forming Union and Confederate forces. On both sides, expectations ran high that the war would be short, glorious, and successful. The gruesome and seemingly endless war of attrition that ensued obliged both sides to embark upon radical experiments in all-out mobilization for war.

The Confederacy, with a smaller population from which to draw, acted first. In April 1862, the Confederate Congress passed the Conscription Act. Allowing for an array of exemptions and for the hiring of substitutes, this measure was designed less to raise new recruits than to prevent the dissolution of Confederate forces already in the field: it obliged Southern soldiers who in 1861 had volunteered for one year to remain in service indefinitely. Closing loopholes as the



As this recruiting poster for the 7th Indiana Cavalry suggests, the Civil War draft was not entirely a failure: it stimulated volunteering.

war progressed, the hard-pressed South would use the draft to squeeze out the last of its manpower reserves. Of the one million soldiers who served in the armies of the South, 21 percent were draftees.

Though resisting the coercive power of the federal government was one motive for their rebellion, Southerners accommodated themselves to involuntary military service with remarkable ease. They had little alternative. In the North, however, circumstances were different. Fully 92 percent of the 2.1 million soldiers who fought to preserve the Union were volunteers. Yet even the North's vast reserves of manpower and patriotism were not inexhaustible. On March 3, 1863, with little to show for two years of war but heartbreaking losses, Congress enacted the Enrollment Act, which specified that "all able-bodied male citizens . . . are hereby declared to constitute the national forces." This legislation laid the basis for the first full-fledged national draft.

Seemingly oblivious to local prerogatives still highly valued in American society, the federal government went about implementing the measure in a needlessly

heavy-handed way, assigning a uniformed provost marshal to oversee conscription in each congressional district. In the summer of 1863, efforts by these officials to register prospective conscripts and to conduct lotteries to identify inductees triggered widespread riots. The most violent—possibly the worst civil disorder in American history—occurred over several days in July in New York City. Thousands of rioters, mostly poor Irish immigrants, rampaged through Manhattan, burned the draft headquarters, and ransacked the homes of government officials and wealthy Republicans. Several blacks were lynched. Estimates of those killed in the melee range from several dozen to several hundred. New York was not the only scene of violent unrest. In Boston, for example, Union artillerymen employed canister and grapeshot to disperse a mob of protesters who had laid siege to a local armory. Here, as elsewhere, the cost of restoring order was heavy.

The workingmen and poor whites who took to the streets were not concerned that conscription represented, in Webster's words, "an abominable doctrine." Their objections were more basic: they wanted neither to forfeit their jobs (especially to blacks) nor to risk their lives for a cause not their own. For President Abraham Lincoln, the issue was also a practical one. "The republican institutions and territorial integrity of our country cannot be maintained without the further raising and supporting of armies," he reasoned in a document drafted that September. "There can be no army without men. Men can be had only voluntarily, or involuntarily. We have ceased to obtain them voluntarily; and to obtain them involuntarily, is the draft—the conscription."

The brutal suppression of rioting by Union regiments—some of them just returned from the Battle of Gettysburg—did not purchase acquiescence. While the wealthy hired substitutes or paid a "commutation fee" to avoid service, the less favored found other ways to dodge the draft. They ignored orders to report, changed their names, or simply moved. The net result was an ineffective system. Of 300,000 men called up in the summer of 1863, only 10,000 ended up in

Mr. Lincoln's army. Overall, four separate federal drafts produced a piddling 46,000 conscripts and 118,000 substitutes for the Union Army. America's first real encounter with conscription had proven a major disappointment.

III

The military history of the Civil War is a chronicle of dogged gallantry—and of stupefying waste and incompetence. In the end, volunteers fought and won the war for the Union. But while the citizen-soldier tradition emerged seemingly intact, it soon came under increasingly critical scrutiny. During the following decades, the officer corps of the minuscule regular army mounted a sustained intellectual assault on the premises underpinning traditional American military policy. Led by reformers such as Brevet Major General Emory Upton, these regulars argued that the United States had prevailed in war *despite*, rather than because of, its reliance on militiamen and volunteers. They argued, moreover, that success in the Civil War had come at an unnecessarily high cost, as “undisciplined troops commanded by generals and officers utterly ignorant of the military art” were butchered to little purpose.

Upton's call for American military professionalization accorded well with developments abroad. In the armies of the European powers, innovations such as general staffs, war colleges, detailed mobilization plans, and improved training of reserve formations all pointed toward a more deliberate approach to preparing for war. As the 19th century drew to a close, this emphasis on centralized planning, rational organization, and efficiency also meshed with advanced thinking then coming into fashion in industrializing America.

In short, around 1900, civilian progressives and military reformers met, mingled, and discovered, to their mutual amazement, that they were made for one another. To soldiers, the application of progressive principles implied an approach to military affairs that would elevate the prestige of regular officers, place state militias under federal

supervision, and give the United States a military establishment that would put it on a par with the acknowledged Great Powers.

To progressives, those same principles suggested that the armed forces could serve as a schoolhouse for building national unity and inculcating democratic values, as well as provide an instrument for achieving the American Mission. The concept that would enable both parties to achieve their aims was universal military training, a system of brief compulsory service for all young men that would create a vast national (rather than state-controlled) reserve, easily mobilized in time of emergency to fight under the command of regular officers. This national reserve army would displace the militia as the first line of defense. Universal military training would reaffirm the citizen's obligation to serve—but shift his allegiance from state to nation.

With the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, military reformers and civilian progressives collaborated on the “preparedness movement,” a grassroots campaign to generate support for a peacetime army of unprecedented size and capability. The way to achieve this, argued the reformers, both in and out of uniform, was to institute universal military training. “Manhood suffrage means manhood obligation for service in peace and war,” wrote the influential General Leonard Wood in 1916. “This is the basic principle upon which a truly representative government, or free democracy, rests and must rest.” Adherence to this principle would provide for the “moral organization of the people,” teaching them “to think in terms of the nation” rather than locality or narrow self-interest. The influential progressive Charles W. Eliot, president emeritus of Harvard University, agreed. Only universal military training could create a force that was both strong and democratic. Yet the benefits of such training would extend well beyond military affairs. For citizens “to be always ready to defend and to maintain American ideals of public justice and liberty would add to the self-respect of the people,” Eliot said, and teach them to think of their nation “as a unified and exalted power for good in the world—humane, unselfish, and aspiring.”

Such progressive sentiments shaped the



In May 1917, little more than a month after the United States entered World War I, Congress enacted a draft law, after heated debate in both houses. Here, draftees en route to boot camp parade in New York City.

manpower policies implemented once the United States actually entered the war in April 1917. In contrast to the practice in previous conflicts, America did not first summon volunteers to the colors, then resort to conscription as an afterthought or act of desperation. Instead, the federal government determined from the outset that it would choose those who would fight. Conscription formed part of a larger effort to mobilize not just an army but an entire people. Explaining the system of Selective Service that he had asked the Congress to implement, President Woodrow Wilson in June 1917 declared: “It is not an army that we must shape and train for war; it is a nation. . . . It is in no sense a conscription of the unwilling; it is, rather, selection from a nation which has volunteered in mass.”

Selective Service was not universal military training, but it still accorded well with progressive principles, creating a people’s army led by trained professionals. Consistent with the approved tenets of pro-

gressivism, it empowered “experts”—bureaucrats in the War Department and other federal agencies—to decide, on the basis of the nation’s overall interests, who would man the trenches and who, the shipyards and munitions plants.

Not everyone agreed with this approach. To Senator Robert M. LaFollette of Wisconsin, the issue was clear: “The draft is the corollary of militarism and militarism spells death to democracy.” But his was a minority view, soon swept aside by the surge of spread-eagle nationalism that accompanied America’s entry into the war. That wave of patriotism and the fact that Wilson shrewdly allowed local rather than federal officials to administer the system made the draft of 1917–18 a success. Some 2.8 million young American men were drafted, 72 percent of the doughboys who served during the war. Resistance to conscription was by no means inconsequential: 338,000 of those receiving draft notices failed to report and were classified as deserters, while 57,000 others applied for conscientious objector status. But overall

(and especially in comparison with the Civil War experience), Selective Service worked.

Success, however, did not translate into a general willingness to continue conscription in peacetime. As soon as the Armistice was declared, in November 1918, the great army of citizen-soldiers dissolved. Though senior military officers tried briefly to revive enthusiasm for universal military training, their arguments went unheeded. Throughout the 1920s and well into the '30s, U.S. military policy reverted to 19th-century practice: a very modest professional army backed by a much larger militia—now called the National Guard—which continued to frustrate demands that it adhere to training and readiness standards mandated by regulars. The result did not inspire awe. But the paltriness of the nation's military did not worry most Americans. Nor did ancient questions about civic duty. For most of the interwar period, the answer to the question "Who will serve?" was "Who cares?"

The rise of Hitler and the threat of war in the Pacific changed that. Prodded into action by veterans of the old preparedness movement and thoroughly frightened by the collapse of France in the spring of 1940, Congress that September enacted the first-ever peacetime draft. The Selective Training and Service Act stated that "in a free society the obligations and privileges of military training and service should be shared generally." The term of involuntary service was limited to 12 months, and draftees were not to be deployed outside the Western Hemisphere. Renewed on the eve of Pearl Harbor—and with restrictions on deployment lifted—this legislation provided the basis for the massive American force that waged global war. The requirements for military manpower in World War II were staggering. By 1942, the draft call reached 500,000 *per month*. Of the 10.5 million soldiers who served in the wartime army, 93 percent were draftees. In a conflict that lasted far longer than World War I and that required a far more complete mobilization of the nation's human resources, draft resistance was negligible.

Yet again, the wartime system, however well it worked, did not provide a basis for sustaining a peacetime military. The need

for preparedness and the experience of two world wars notwithstanding, influential political figures viewed the draft as an expedient justified only in dire emergency. "Military conscription is essentially totalitarian," Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio bluntly asserted.

Even in the 1940s, old fears about the incompatibility of democracy and a standing army survived, and American leaders had to take them into account, just as George Washington had. Looking ahead to the postwar world, General George C. Marshall, chief of staff of the U.S. Army, said he regarded "a large standing army as an impossibility . . . because of the repugnance of our people toward a large standing force." He saw no reason to abandon the tradition of maintaining only a small regular military establishment, so long as it could "be reinforced in time of emergency by organized units drawn from a citizen army reserve." For Marshall, the preferred means of developing this citizen army reserve was universal military training.

President Harry S. Truman agreed. But in the heady aftermath of V-J Day, with the boys eager to come home and an era of peace beckoning, public opinion—and hence, the Congress—did not. Even in watered-down form, universal military training never had a chance. The combat-hardened legions that the United States had raised at such great effort and expense rapidly disappeared. In the spring of 1947, Selective Service expired altogether. Though the nation was assuming new responsibilities for security in the postwar world, the military was losing the manpower it needed to meet them.

IV

Mounting Cold War tensions, however, soon persuaded Americans that the nation could ill afford its usual lackadaisical approach to peacetime security. Even with the atom bomb and increased reliance on airpower as the mainstay of American defense, the United States found that it still had need for a large conventional force. And just as in Lincoln's day, there could be "no army without men." In June

1948, Congress enacted, and President Truman signed into law, a new Selective Service measure. With modifications, it was to provide the chief source of military manpower for the next quarter-century and two major wars.

But two years after the return to conscription, the draftee-sustained military still needed help to respond to the North Korean invasion of South Korea in June 1950. Consequently, Truman mobilized eight National Guard divisions and recalled tens of thousands of reservists. However necessary, this action provoked an outcry of protest. Many of those recalled were veterans of World War II who had won “their war” and were now being asked to fight another.

In response, the Department of Defense in 1951 established a rotation policy based on a one-year combat tour in Korea.

Replacements supplied by a massively expanded draft—September 1951’s planned quota of 10,000 was revised upward to 56,000 after the North Korean invasion—arrived to relieve the reservists. Meanwhile, the draftees themselves, rather than being called “for the duration,” likewise served only a one-year combat tour and were released altogether after two years on active duty. Intended to distribute the risks of combat more broadly, this arrangement was not conducive to military effectiveness, but it did make more palatable an unpopular war conducted without the prospect of a decisive outcome. And the policies enacted during the Korean War established precedents that the military would revive for the Vietnam War.

The experience of the two world wars and Korea had seemingly established beyond doubt the prerogative of the federal government to compel citizens to undertake military service. But after the Korean War, the “selective” approach to conscription came to seem less and less “universal,” less and less a matter mainly of citizenship. As draft calls shrank year by year, the chief mission of Selective Service became less the drafting of men into the army than the “channeling” of men who were not drafted. This, explained General Lewis B. Hershey, the Selective Service director, meant using deferments as an incentive to nudge young men “into occupations and professions that are said by those in charge of government to be the necessary ones.” The competition with the Soviet Union was invoked to justify this: channeling would provide the United States with the engineers, scientists, and teachers it needed to prevail. With local draft boards using local standards to award educational and occupational deferments, military service became increasingly the lot of the less educated and less affluent. The answer to the question “Who will serve?” was changing.

For the rest of the Eisenhower era, with the prospect of American involvement in a shooting war apparently remote, neither the draft nor the channeling seemed especially burdensome. Parents might be a little uneasy about certain



MAJ. GEN. LEWIS B. HERSHEY

For an A-1 army
In I-A times,
Selective Service
Selected him
To prevent free rides
To the front and fame,
In sort of a glorified
Noodlers game,
You feel a draft?
You'd better check.
It's That Man breathing
On your neck.
—ROBERT JACOBSON.

The Selective Service chief visible in this 1943 Saturday Evening Post cartoon was not yet the controversial figure of the Vietnam era.

new cultural influences, such as Elvis Presley and rock 'n' roll, but traditional American patriotism persisted. Those who were drafted did their duty. The summons that in 1958 sent Presley off in uniform to serve his country disrupted his career, but he went without complaint, and most of his fans were pleased that he was doing the right thing.

It was too good to last, and it didn't. President Lyndon B. Johnson's escalation of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War saw to that. With the buildup of American combat troops in South Vietnam that began in the spring of 1965 came a huge increase in the number of Americans drafted. In February 1965, the monthly draft quota was a minuscule 3,600. By April 1966, it had spiked to 42,200. But that was still only a fraction of the millions of draft-eligible men, their numbers starting to be swollen by the massive "baby boom" generation.

Channeling increasingly came to seem a life-and-death matter—and, along with the draft, an arbitrary, inequitable practice. In 1969, about 1.75 million college students were deferred, more than 22 times the number in 1951, during the Korean War. During the Vietnam War, a high school graduate was twice as likely to be drafted and twice as likely to go to Vietnam as a contemporary who had finished college. Once in Vietnam, he was more likely to find himself in harm's way. In 1969, draftees constituted only 16 percent of the entire armed forces but 88 percent of the infantrymen in Vietnam—and more than half of the combat deaths.

Responding to criticism and protests, President Nixon's administration sought to redress obvious inequities, notably by ending most deferments and instituting a national lottery. Despite those efforts, the perception persisted that the Vietnam draft was fundamentally unfair. That perception has not changed much since. In his best-selling memoir, *My American Journey* (1995), General Colin Powell, for instance, denounced the "raw class discrimination" of a system that treated the "poorer, less educated, less privileged" as expendable, while pretending that "the rest are too good to risk."

In the eyes of the antiwar movement, the draft and the war itself were inextricably linked. Opposition to the war fueled opposition to the draft. Inexorably, as the war dragged on, opposition to the draft intensified into loathing of military service altogether. There ensued a radical campaign, winked at by some respectable organizations, that aimed to suborn the soldiers fighting the war. The coffeehouses, underground newspapers, and draft counseling centers that sprouted up outside the gates of military installations across the United States existed less to save young Americans from the clutches of conscription than to undermine the government's capacity to continue the war effort. As one underground paper advised: "Don't desert. Go to Vietnam and kill your commanding officer."

These efforts were not without effect. In 1971, in the unit in which I was serving in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam, a young enlisted soldier did in fact gun down his company commander, a captain barely three years out of West Point. That murder in broad daylight of a white officer by a black soldier seemed to me an apt metaphor for the wretched condition then of the draftee army, a force made up largely of citizens compelled to fight a war that growing numbers of their fellow citizens at home opposed—and a force riven by race and political dissent and so much else.

That draftee army was in an advanced state of disintegration. Incidents of "fragging"—furtive attacks by American soldiers intended to maim or kill their own leaders—had become commonplace. (More than 200 such incidents were reported in 1970.) Drug abuse reached pandemic proportions. The racial climate was poisonous. Traditional measures of military discipline, such as AWOL (absent without leave) rates and desertions, suggested a force on the verge of collapse. At home, the Selective Service system itself was struggling to cope: in 1971, it turned out 153,000 draftees and took in 121,000 applications for conscientious objector status.

The continuing protests against the war as ill conceived or immoral, the continuing turmoil on campuses and the nightly



In a decade of protest, burning draft cards was perhaps the most potent symbolic protest of all.

television news, prompted Nixon to convert dissatisfaction with the draft to his—and, he supposed, the nation’s—political advantage.

The Pentagon’s senior leaders were by no means eager in the early 1970s to embark upon Nixon’s highly publicized experiment with an all-volunteer force. Who would enlist in a military that was then at an all-time low in public esteem? The answer seemed obvious: only those who could find nothing better to do—the dropouts, the untalented, the shiftless. This indeed proved to be the case, until well-conceived incentives, combined with the changed political climate of the 1980s under President Ronald Reagan, turned the situation around.

V

To the question “Who will serve?” the nation’s answer has now become: “Those who want to serve.” At the end of the 1990s, this answer seems well suited to the requirements of national security, as well as to the prevailing national political climate. The century-long trend of machines displacing men as

the principal determinants of combat strength in conventional warfare continues to accelerate. In the modern American way of war, technology trumps mass. That renders the old idea of a citizen army obsolete.

Furthermore, in a society in which half the eligible voters did not even bother to show up at the polls in the last presidential election, the notion of an obligation to participate in the country’s defense has become an apparent anachronism, an oddity from another time. To today’s typical 18-year-old, compulsory military service is all but inconceivable.

The changed nature of warfare, as well as the changed outlook of Americans, argues that Nixon’s instincts in ending the draft were correct. It now makes sense to hire professionals to handle the demanding, highly specialized business of national security—an enterprise that tends to involve not defending the country as such, but protecting and advancing its burgeoning interests around the world. In the corporate jargon of the day, American defense has been “outsourced.” The citizen simply foots the bill.

Yet ironically, even as the performance to date of the all-volunteer military has put

to rest earlier doubts about such a force, the new professionalism has given rise to whole new realms of controversy. For those who now regard military service as merely a career, one like any other—a view bolstered by optimistic expectations that American soldiers will never have to face another Hamburger Hill or Chosin Reservoir—the armed forces offer a choice arena in which to pursue the current national obsessions with gender and sexual orientation. In this environment, debates about gender-integrated basic training, and about the “don’t ask, don’t tell” rule, assume far more prominence than concerns about military effectiveness. Altogether lost from view are the concerns of earlier generations about the obligations of citizenship and the imperative of infusing into American military institutions the genius of the people.

As the end of the 20th century nears, Americans are inclined to shrug off indications of a growing, and potentially dangerous, cultural divide between soldiers and civilians; to dismiss evidence that the officer corps may be abandoning its tradition of remaining studiously apolitical; and naively to assume that advanced

technology and the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs will provide the United States with an effective—and conveniently casualty-free—response to future security threats. Perhaps worst of all, the generation of Americans now reaching maturity is being deprived of any awareness that citizenship ought to imply some larger shared responsibility for the common good.

In his remarkably prescient Farewell Address of January 1961, President Dwight D. Eisenhower reflected on the dilemma of any democracy obliged to maintain a large and powerful military establishment. “Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry,” he warned, can provide the prudent and responsible direction of military affairs, “so that security and liberty may prosper together.”

Twenty-five years into its thus-far successful experiment with a standing military of professionals, the world’s sole remaining superpower would be ill advised to undertake—and the American people would be unlikely to tolerate—a return to the citizen-soldier tradition of an earlier era. But American citizens would be foolhardy in the extreme if, in their newfound comfort with a “standing army,” they took either their security or their liberty for granted.

Further Reading

In **To Raise an Army: The Draft Comes to Modern America** (Free Press, 1987), John Whiteclay Chambers II deals chiefly with the Selective Service system of 1917–1918. George Q. Flynn provides a history of conscription from World War II to the Vietnam War and its termination in **The Draft, 1940–1973** (University Press of Kansas, 1993). Eliot A. Cohen looks at **Citizens and Soldiers: The Dilemmas of Military Service** (Cornell University Press, paper, 1990) from a comparative international perspective.

Readers wanting additional detail can find it in two comprehensive collections of documents: John O’Sullivan and Alan M. Meckler, eds., **The Draft and Its Enemies** (Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), and John Whiteclay Chambers II, ed., **Draftees or Volunteers** (Garland Publishing Co., 1975).