

# Time to Kill Draft Registration

by Doug Bandow

For more than 20 years volunteer soldiers have protected America. Naturally, there were people who didn't believe that it could be done. In 1967 the Civilian Advisory Panel on Military Manpower Procurement warned against proposals that would leave "the nation placing its faith in its own citizenry to rally to its defense when the national security is threatened." Six years later, however, the United States inaugurated the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) which, despite much early criticism, has produced the best-educated and -trained military in the world today.

In fact, conscription was always a minority part of the American experience. The colonists won their independence without a national draft and only "porous" conscription at the local level through the militia system. The United States defended itself during its second war with Britain, killed untold numbers of Indians, invaded Mexico, seized Cuba and the Philippines from Spain, intervened in an assortment of Latin American countries earlier this century, invaded Grenada and then Panama, and defeated Iraq, all without resorting to the draft. Great Britain, America's first adversary, long

maintained its global colonial empire with a volunteer military.

Even large wars have been fought with heavy reliance on volunteers. The bulk of soldiers on both sides during the American Civil War joined voluntarily. In the North, which had an ample population base, conscription probably contributed little to ultimate victory, other than by allowing General Ulysses Grant to carry out his costly attrition campaign against General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. The majority of British soldiers in World War I were volunteers; only after the steady stream of patriotic young recruits could not satisfy the army with sufficient replacements to continue attacking impregnable German trenches did the government resort to "national service." Unfortunately, this step made possible an even worse personnel meat-grinder, termed the "sausage machine," than Grant's 1864 campaign. Most of the extra men generated from conscription were simply dissipated. Complained Prime Minister David Lloyd George years later: "The generals could not be expected to judge the issue dispassionately. Their reckless wastage of the man power so lavishly placed at their disposal also vitiated their judgement."

The United States turned to the draft during this century's great conflagrations, World Wars I and II, and then maintained forced service to prosecute the Cold War. The prospect of a cataclysmic clash between NATO and the Warsaw Pact kept a renewed draft as a possibility even after creation of

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the AVF. But today the only scenarios that envision renewed conscription in order to defend America could serve as scripts for J.R.R. Tolkien. Otherwise, a draft would be necessary only if the U.S. decided to play globocop, intervening in local conflicts around the world and attempting to reconstruct failed societies. Few American young people then would likely join the military, risking their lives to arrest foreign warlords, reinstate deposed demagogues, and separate clans, ethnic groups, and tribes that have been killing each other for decades and even centuries. Only conscription could provide cannon fodder for such dubious endeavors.

This is unlikely, however, because average Americans won't allow it. Some analysts actually complain about the public's reluctance to mindlessly send soldiers to their deaths, pining instead for the good ol' days when people didn't mind having their sons die in imperial adventures abroad. Edward Luttwak, for instance, waxes eloquent when discussing the fact that "the populations of the great powers of history were commonly comprised of" large families at a time when "infant mortality rates were also high." Thus, he explains, "the loss of one more youngster in war had a different meaning than it has for today's families." For Mr. Luttwak, 1914, when Europe sent millions of young men streaming off into war, was obviously a very good year. Happily, in the American republic today people value both life and liberty. So when 18 soldiers unnecessarily died in Somalia for no purpose, Americans rightly said "Enough!"

And yet the conscription apparatus—Selective Service and draft registration—remains firmly in place. It is almost as if politicians in Washington think that it is still 1917, 1940, or 1980, the other times in this century that Selective Service began to sign men up for war.

Just look back to 1980, when Jimmy Carter began registering 18-year-old men for a possible draft. The Cold War was raging, NATO confronted a numerically superior Warsaw Pact, the Soviets had invaded Af-

ghanistan, Iran was holding Americans hostage, and U.S. confidence was slipping. Today there is no more Soviet Union, no more bipolar struggle, no more threat of global conflict. Communism is dead, Washington's allies dominate the globe, and America reigns supreme, both economically and militarily. The Pentagon fought the Gulf War with volunteers, foresees no future need for conscripts, and says draft registration is unnecessary. The Selective Service System, it would seem, has become a forlorn anachronism.

However, President Bill Clinton, the avid "national service" advocate who worked so hard to avoid serving in Vietnam, apparently still lives in 1980. He now proclaims his opposition to proposals to end the draft sign-up. It is, he explained to the Speaker of the House, "essential to our national security." And so the federal government continues to gather names for an outdated list in order to acquire surplus soldiers for a fanciful conflict.

## The Origins of Registration

When Congress approved conscription for World Wars I and II, it simply registered young men en masse. With the reinstitution of a peacetime draft after World War II, Selective Service initiated an ongoing registration program, a practice continued despite the inauguration of the All-Volunteer Force in 1973. Two years later President Gerald Ford suspended registration, and Selective Service was placed into "deep standby" status. Concern over lagging quality in the AVF led to proposals for renewed registration and conscription; while Congress rejected those proposals, it did begin to expand Selective Service, and the Carter administration developed a plan for post-mobilization registration. Then came the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, leading President Carter to, among other things, propose the registration of both men and women. After rancorous debate, Congress approved funding to sign up 18-year-old men.

Carter administration officials contended that registration was "a necessary step to

preserving or enhancing our national security requirements." Unfortunately for them, one week before the president's announcement Selective Service itself had prepared a report endorsing post-mobilization registration as "preferable" to a peacetime system. Thus, OMB Deputy Director John White acknowledged, the President really was "indicating to the world our resolve." Alas, there is little evidence that the Soviets, let alone anyone else, noticed.

During the 1980 presidential campaign Ronald Reagan, a long-time opponent of conscription, denounced registration for doing "little to enhance our military preparedness," decreasing "our military preparedness, by making people think we have solved our defense problems," and destroying "the very values that our society is committed to defending." However, once elected, President Reagan faced strong Pentagon and Selective Service pressure to preserve the sign-up. The issue reached him for decision after Poland's Soviet-induced crackdown on the labor union Solidarity, causing him to place exaggerated importance on the program's alleged symbolic importance. He officially based his decision to retain registration on its alleged efficacy in procuring emergency manpower, but his arguments, like Carter's, were immediately undercut by the facts, in this case the findings of his own Military Manpower Task Force that peacetime registration would save little time during war and other alternatives were available. So the administration was reduced to contending that the United States would appear weak if it dropped the program after Warsaw's actions.

Once in place, registration proved permanent. Eventually the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, Polish voters rebuffed the Communist Party, the Berlin Wall fell, Solidarity's Lech Walesa became president of Poland, the U.S.S.R. collapsed, the Warsaw Pact disbanded, with its former members seeking to join NATO, and Russia's military disintegrated at increasing speed. Still the draft sign-up continued. Last year the House voted to end both Selective

Service and registration, but the Senate balked and the agency survived. In December of 1993 the Department of Defense issued a report acknowledging that the program could be dropped with "no effect on military mobilization requirements, little effect on the time it would take to mobilize and no measurable effect on military recruitment." As a result, stated DOD, "suspending peacetime registration could be accomplished with limited risk to national security considering the low probability of the need for conscription." At last the case was closed, or so it would seem.

## Presidential Image-Building

But after a few months of thinking it over, President Clinton announced that he intended to keep registration. The likeliest explanation is that Bill Clinton, like Presidents Carter and Reagan before him, was attracted by the sign-up's perceived symbolic value. However, there is no longer a Soviet Union to overawe regarding either Afghanistan or Poland; indeed, there is no nation anywhere that the United States needs to impress about much of anything. Thus, President Clinton presumably saw registration as a means of burnishing his own military reputation. He is roundly disliked by brass and grunt alike; his incompetent and inconsistent foreign policy worries the most insular American. Keeping registration appears, however superficially, to be a "pro-military" decision.

That Clinton's motives must reflect such unstated political concerns is evident from the fact that none of his three official reasons for keeping registration are believable—or, indeed, even make sense. The first is security insurance, the second is an international signal, and the third is promotion of better civil-military relations.

*Security Insurance.* According to the president: "Maintaining the SSS [Selective Service System] and draft registration provide [sic] a hedge against unforeseen threats and is a relatively low-cost 'insurance policy' against our underestimating the maximum level of threat we expect our Armed

Forces to face.” Acting Selective Service Director G. Huntington Banister has similarly argued that funding his agency “equates to paying a reasonable insurance premium to provide our Nation with a hedge against the unknown.”

The notion of security insurance sounds superficially appealing, but in the case of registration we should ask, “Insurance against what?” Virginians have little need of earthquake insurance; farmers who till Nebraska’s cornfields needn’t purchase hurricane insurance. America today does not need registration.

The sign-up was always intended to quickly generate a large conscript army—à la America’s 12 million-man military in World War II—for a protracted conventional war against the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact centered in Europe. The possibility of that kind of conflict today is about the same as an invasion from Mars. Which means that the premium for registration “insurance” would be better spent elsewhere.

Indeed, what is so different today than even a decade ago is that both sides of the military equation have changed. The global hegemonic threat, the Soviet Union, is gone, replaced by a much weaker Russia, with decaying military and imploding economy. At the same time, America’s populous and prosperous allies have spurred ahead, joined by the Central and Eastern European states, which are more closely aligned with Washington than Moscow. Last year NATO outspent Russia by 15 to one; Britain, France, and Germany each spent more than Moscow on the military. It is hard to concoct even the most implausible military scenario requiring the instantaneous creation of a huge conscript army.

## Militarily Valueless

Even if generating an immediate supply of plentiful manpower mattered, the draft sign-up is an expensive irrelevancy. Draftees have to be trained as well as conscripted, meaning that it would be five to six months before any significant number reached the battlefield. Thus registration, to the extent

that it does anything, only advances by a couple of weeks the production of a few extra soldiers *months after the United States would have gone to war*. As a result, the program would be useless in the smaller conflicts we are likely to see in the future. For instance, the war with Iraq would have ended before any significant number of conscripts would have made it to the battlefield had President Bush restarted the draft when he first sent troops to Kuwait.

Registration isn’t even necessary to preserve the option of conscription. All registration does is advance inductions, making soldiers available slightly more quickly months down the line after they finish basic and specialized skill training. But the actual time saved is minimal and of no practical value. Selective Service now says that it could deliver the first draftee 13 days after mobilization but it would take weeks more without advanced registration. In fact, Carter administration officials developed a post-mobilization plan—shelved with no little embarrassment after the President switched course—to deliver the first inductee within 17 days. Only slightly more pessimistic were the Congressional Budget Office in 1978 and Selective Service System in 1979, which both figured that a post-mobilization sign-up would yield the first draftee within a month. Similarly, President Reagan’s Military Manpower Task Force concluded that it would take about a month to begin conscripting young men without peacetime registration. And that estimate came in 1982, before a decade’s worth of dramatic technological change.

Equally important is that at the start of any war the training camps would be overwhelmed with new recruits awaiting training, reservists needing retraining, members of the Delayed Entry Program, who have signed up to enter the service at a later date but could be inducted immediately in an emergency, and volunteers. The first three categories alone would generate a minimum of 40,000 new soldiers within a month. Even more volunteers are likely. American experience during World Wars I and II demonstrates that any crisis serious enough to

warrant consideration of conscription would likely bring forth a flood of recruits. As a result, there would be *no room for draftees for one or two months or even longer*, at which point a post-mobilization system would be delivering an equal stream of conscripts.

*Wrong Signal.* The President explained that his second reason for not ending registration was that "Terminating the SSS and draft registration now could send the wrong signal to our potential enemies who are watching for signs of U.S. resolve." This argument is not new. Both Presidents Carter and Reagan contended that registration would demonstrate toughness to the Soviets. General David Jones, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, termed registration a "visible sign of commitment—to allies, friends, potential enemies" and a "clear manifestation of U.S. will." As overwrought as these arguments were then, in 1980 there was at least an adversarial power to whom a demonstration of resolve had some value, especially after the disastrous Carter years. Yet even then the draft sign-up was not a serious symbolic weapon. Observed Reagan, before he flip-flopped on the issue: "the Soviets can tell the difference between computer lists of inexperienced young men, and new weapons systems, a million-man reserve, and an experienced army."

Today the "resolve" argument is far sillier. Who are, one wonders, the enemies to be cowed by continuing registration? Does President Clinton really believe that North Korea's Kim Jong II or Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic would be emboldened if the administration stopped forcing 18-year-old American men to fill out a form at the post office? Or that Boris Yeltsin might order the seizure of Latvia, Poland, or even Alaska, to pacify opposition nationalists, if President Clinton dropped registration? Just who is President Clinton hoping to impress?

*Civil-Military Relations.* Finally, President Clinton argued:

As fewer and fewer members of our society have direct military experience, it

is increasingly important to maintain the link between the All-Volunteer Force and our society at large. The Armed Forces must also know that the general population stands behind them, committed to serve, should the preservation of our national security so require.

What is most striking about this argument is that it comes from a president who worked hard to avoid service. To now force young men to sign up for the draft in order to expand their contact with the military seems a bit hypocritical, to say the least.

Still, the president's concern is valid: politicians who understand the reality of military service are probably less likely to squander the citizens' lives in senseless adventurism. Indeed, the Pentagon has proved itself to be most reluctant to enter into such disastrous civil conflicts as Lebanon and Somalia. It was Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger who took the more cautious position during his very public debate with Secretary of State George Shultz over the use of military force.

Alas, registration does nothing to, in the president's words, "maintain the link between the All-Volunteer Force and our society at large." Selective Service spokesman Lewis Brodsky argues that the draft sign-up "is virtually the only thing left that the typical American man has to do that's associated with military service." Signing a card when turning 18 does not turn one into a patriot, however, or give one any sense of the rigors of wartime service. Nor does registration indicate that "the general population stands behind" the armed forces, as claimed by the president—after all, Bill Clinton *had registered* before he went off to Oxford University. That obviously did not mean that he stood behind the military. In a conflict that is popular, volunteers will flood forth; in one which many people perceive to be unnecessary, meaningless, and immoral, like Vietnam, registration and conscription will generate social division and hatred of the military. The president would achieve much more in this regard simply by reaffirming the worth of the military as a



vocation and encouraging young people to serve.

## Private Alternatives

Even if registration had some value, there is a better private alternative, one which would fulfill the president's three stated objectives for peacetime registration. For instance, the administration could create a registration analogue of the All-Volunteer Force—a reserve pool of untrained volunteers ready to accept immediate call-up in the event of a national emergency and mobilization.

How to create such a Reserve Volunteer Force (RVF)? The Pentagon could sign up, say, 100,000 or 150,000 young men (perhaps women too, though they are not presently registered or drafted). In a national emergency, they would be liable to report to the Department of Defense within two weeks, the period within which Selective Service currently promises to deliver the first inductee. Members could be paid a nominal sum, perhaps \$100 annually, involved in the military "family" through participation in events organized by the active and reserve forces as well as armed services associations, and praised by the President.

This sort of system would provide better security benefits than peacetime registration, since it would yield a current list of people ready to serve, not an outdated roster of forced participants. The RVF's size could be adjusted depending upon the size of the safety margin desired. A successful voluntary registration would demonstrate genuine patriotic resolve to America's adversaries, whoever they may be. Moreover, involving tens of thousands of young people through an RVF in military activities would enhance civil-military relations, and probably help promote recruiting, too. Most important, a voluntary program would be consistent with America's philosophical heritage, one represented by the creation of the AVF. In any time other than "the most severe national emergency," stated Ronald Reagan in 1980, "a draft or registration destroys the very values that our society is

committed to defending." An RVF would demonstrate to the world just how important those principles are to tens of thousands of young Americans.

## Conclusion

Registration had little enough security value 15 years ago, when it was first proposed by President Carter; it has none today. Registration arguably had some symbolic worth in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, but that justification disappeared years ago. Today conservatives as well as liberals should recognize the difference between inaccurate lists of untrained 18-year-olds and real defense measures.

At a time when the watchword in Washington is reinventing government, dropping registration and dismantling the Selective Service System would be a good place to start. What better way to begin cutting government waste and the deficit than by eliminating this relic of the Cold War, which currently costs \$25 million a year? Indeed, if Bill Clinton's rationale for retaining registration is to be believed (a tough sell, given both his public and private records), it is hard to imagine the circumstances under which the United States could abandon the program—the world will, after all, always be dangerous and uncertain. But this supposed insurance offers no serious military value. Even DOD, which rarely finds a military program that it doesn't support, admits that "registration could be suspended with no effect on military mobilization requirements, little effect on the time it would take to mobilize, and no measurable effect on military recruitment."

In the end, peacetime draft registration stands as an embarrassing example of how difficult it is to end a government program, however irrelevant it has become. More important, the sign-up remains a glaring inconsistency with our commitment to raise America's armed forces in a manner consistent with the fundamental freedoms that underlie the founding of our nation and that the military exists to defend. □

## The Real Enemy of Liberty

**R**ecently, my family and I moved. Not far—only about nine blocks. That didn't make it any less of an ordeal, however. It took us five exhausting days and nights, and considerable expense, to truck everything to our new house.

Packing up and moving to a new home is emotionally wrenching and physically grueling. It's especially difficult if you love your old residence, as we did. It was a big house on a tree-lined street. It had lots of dark oak throughout, a charming dining room, and a finished attic that held my library and office. In addition, we had many fine neighbors who organized annual parties and clean-up days for our block. And our mortgage was outrageously low.

So why did we move? The deciding factor was the mounting threat of crime in the neighborhood.

Break-ins, thefts, and vandalism, once rare, were on the rise. A wonderful Victorian place at the end of our block, vacant for some time, had in recent months been systematically stripped of its chandeliers, beveled glass windows, and fireplace mantelpieces. Today it's a boarded-up eyesore. Last summer, a block away, a youth arrested repeatedly for arson set his own apartment house on fire. A few nights before we moved, the young couple across the street scared off a prowler trying to force entry in their home.

All this was eroding neighborhood morale. Attendance at our latest annual block party was poor. Some neighbors had given

up and were neglecting their own houses and lawns. Families with children—the bedrock of any community—were either relocating or talking about it.

The trend was unmistakable. So with great regret we bailed out, evicted from a home we loved by the threat of predatory crime.

Viewed statistically, crime is horrific enough. The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that there are some 34 million personal and household victimizations annually—a figure that doesn't even include commercial and business crime. Moreover, our streets and communities are far less safe than they used to be. In 1960, only 161 violent crimes were recorded for every 100,000 people. By 1991, there were 758 violent crimes per 100,000 people. In other words, in just 30 years the violent crime rate, per capita, has nearly *quintupled*.

But statistics can't capture many of the other costs criminals impose on society. Consider, for example, the waste, disruption, and pain this single move has inflicted upon my family. Start with the loss of a home we loved and neighbors we treasured. Then there were the costs of locating, purchasing, mortgaging, and renovating a substantially more expensive home in a neighborhood with much higher property taxes—costs that will amount to many tens of thousands of dollars over the years. Add to this the physical demands and economic impact of the move itself; the time lost from work and other pursuits; the hefty price tag of reinstalling utilities at the new home; the outlays for everything from new furnishings to new business cards and stationery and a new kennel for our dogs (kept largely for security—another hidden cost of crime).

If you add such expenses, and many not mentioned, to similar costs borne by millions of other citizens, you'll get a tiny hint of the enormous impact crime is having upon all aspects of American life.

According to the polls, crime is the number one concern of the public. Yet curiously,

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