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A Crisis of Conscription

“Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” These words, spoken by John F. Kennedy in his inaugural address, reflect a vital thought regarding the importance of sacrifice. Throughout all of American history, there has been a motif of necessary sacrifice. The people of the original thirteen colonies risked their lives and well-being to fight a War of Independence, to construct a new country; a country free from oppression and tyranny. This revolution did not conclude in disorder and devastation, but rather in a nation founded on the principle that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, among these being Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Eighty-seven years later on November 19, 1863, Abraham Lincoln would deliver his famous Gettysburg Address, while in the midst of a war that would preserve the Union and abolish slavery, leaving over seven hundred thousand Americans slain. They had made the ultimate sacrifice, Lincoln said, and “gave the last full measure of devotion.” “It is for us the living,” he stressed, “to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion...”

America would repeatedly be required to sacrifice: during the First World War, the Great Depression, and again in a Second World War; the culmination of which would cause it to emerge as an imperium with the burden of the world on its reluctant shoulders.

Previous presidents of the United States have echoed Kennedy's morale with their own. Ronald Reagan declared that "the spirit of service flows like a deep and mighty river through the history of our nation." George H. W. Bush equated volunteer organizations to "a thousand points of light." Bill Clinton created AmeriCorps, and George W. Bush followed in his stead by organizing the USA Freedom Corps.

Military conscription has been employed by the U.S. federal government in six conflicts: the American Revolutionary War, the American Civil War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. Conscription concluded in 1973, after the United States moved to a solely volunteer military. In the United States, conscription still remains upon a contingency basis by means of the Selective Service Registration. The SSR is the process by which the U.S. government collects names and addresses of males, ages eighteen to twenty-five, to use in case a national emergency necessitates rapid expansion of the Armed Forces.

Many veterans who served between the years of 1948 and 1973, when the draft was mandatory, hold the opinion that bringing back the draft would better the young people on how to serve their country. Mr. Glenn Abel, a retired second lieutenant in the Air Force, argues "I am for the draft because everybody should have the opportunity and have to do something to serve their country while they're living here, as opposed to just taking what the country can give you and not thinking about what you can give the country." Former Second Lieutenant Abel's point of view circles back to Kennedy's opinion, as well as Lincoln's. Kennedy was urging Americans to stop taking advantage of the American system solely for their own selfish advantage. He was asking Americans to give something back; something in return for the good of the country (ie. the nation, the state, the people).

Some in opposition to this proposed draft have argued against it based on three things; sexism, involuntary servitude, and economic struggles. Some feminists regard conscription as discriminatory because it only compels men, not women to military service. The argument is made that by limiting the draft to men, a message is sent that women are unfit to serve in the military, reflecting an “outmoded view” that, in the event of a draft, women’s primary obligation would be to the home front.

Many American libertarians oppose conscription and call for the abolition of the Selective Service Registration, arguing that impressment of individuals into the armed forces amounts to involuntary servitude. Involuntary servitude can be defined as “a condition in which one lacks liberty especially to determine one's course of action or way of life.”

The 13th amendment to the United States Constitution states, “...that neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for a crime, where the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” The 13th amendment protection against involuntary servitude does not prevent the federal government from enforcing a military draft.

Finally, on the subject of the economy, there have been claims made that in a “cost-to-benefit ratio,” conscription during a time of peace is not advantageous. Months or years of service performed by the most fit and capable, subtract from the prosperity and flourishing of the economy. In comparison to these extensive costs, some would argue there is very little benefit or purpose.

Mr. John Molloy Sr., a former weapons mechanic in the Army, speaks his opinion about a mandatory draft; “I think it would be a good thing because it prepares people for military service if it’s necessary.” It is time that Americans remember that “we the people” all need to do our part

to serve this country. Asking, or mandating, that young men give a year of their time to military service for their country would be a powerful way to inculcate the call to service, which has been the very backbone of America since its inception. Reinstating the draft would help unite the next generation of young men in the appreciation for the work of their forefathers, in ways they can give back to their country, and in the defense of “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

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