

THE DEEPEST OBLIGATION OF CITIZENSHIP: LOOKING BEYOND THE WARRIOR CASTE

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MAY 15, 2018

SPECIAL SERIES - STRATEGIC OUTPOST



As we approach Memorial Day, we've been thinking about what it means for Americans to serve their nation. We recently showed our graduate students a military recruiting video which repeatedly mentions "the call to serve" and includes several clips from World War II. Many of the people in those grainy, black-and-white videos were *literally* called to serve — drafted in a time of war and sent into harm's way. The cemeteries of American war dead around the world are full of

tombstones marking the final resting places of thousands of military volunteers, but many more thousands of those who fell after being conscripted to serve, fight, and ultimately die in the service of their country.

For most of U.S. history, serving in the military during times of war has been seen as a fundamental obligation of citizenship. Indeed, the naturalization oath sworn by all newly-minted American citizens states that they will “bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by law.” They may only omit these words if they demonstrate that the statement conflicts with their religious beliefs. Otherwise, the message is unequivocal: The many rights accorded to American citizens are accompanied by the responsibility to serve, protect, and, if necessary, defend the nation when called.

Moreover, it was also widely recognized that conscription would be required during major wars in order to raise enough manpower. American leaders and citizens alike understood that it would be virtually impossible to fight such wars solely by enlisting willing volunteers. The U.S. military relied on a draft to fill its ranks during the Civil War, both world wars, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. Young men (and only men) knew that they might be called up and required to serve in uniform, setting aside whatever other life plans they may have had, knowing that they might return home broken, disfigured, or not at all.

In 1973, however, all of that changed. The establishment of the all-volunteer force transformed military service from a civic obligation into a personal choice. Since then, every American man or woman who has donned the uniform of the U.S. military has voluntarily sworn to support and defend the U.S. Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

In most ways, the all-volunteer force has been a tremendous success. The U.S. military today is the most capable, effective, and professional military force in the world. Despite serious concerns that the demands of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would “break” the all-volunteer force, it has proven more durable and

resilient than even its senior leaders expected. Many troops served two, three, four, or even more tours in various combat zones, at great personal cost to them and their families. Yet despite these strains, volunteers continued to fill the ranks, year after year (though some enlistment standards were temporarily lowered). The all-volunteer force's resilience in the recent wars has made the very idea of a military draft sound even more archaic — seemingly a relic from an earlier era that, like a rotary phone or transistor radio, has outlived its utility and faded into obsolescence.

Yet the remarkable success of the all-volunteer force masks its one profound disadvantage: It has become too easy for most Americans to believe that they are no longer responsible for fighting the nation's wars. It has unintentionally sent the message that "someone else" will take those risks and fight those fights. Since fewer than 1 percent of the population serves in the military, and most of those who now serve are related to someone who has served, the civil-military gap has expanded into a massive chasm. The vast majority of Americans now expect that their lives will remain unaffected during times of war, because a corps of patriotic volunteers will do all the fighting — a belief that has been further cemented by the low profile of the long and unending wars since 2001. Everyday Americans have been able to distance themselves from any involvement in those conflicts in part because there has been no prospect that they will ever have to fight in them. The idea that *any* war, no matter how serious or sizable, could somehow draw the sons and daughters of all Americans into uniform and exposure to death and suffering now seems nearly incomprehensible.

Why is this such a serious problem? First, it makes it too easy for the nation to go to war. It is much easier to decide to send someone else's children, parents, and friends to war than to send your own. Take, for example, American public opinion in October 2002, a few months before the invasion of Iraq. In one poll, 53 percent of those surveyed supported the looming attack. But when another poll asked about what the United States should do if it needed more military personnel

during a war, only 26 percent said they preferred a draft while 69 percent preferred to continue relying on volunteers. More recently, a poll of young Americans taken soon after the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris found that 60 percent of those surveyed supported sending ground troops to participate in a military campaign against the Islamic State, which perpetrated the attacks. Yet when asked, in the very next question, how likely they would be to serve if the United States needed additional troops to combat the Islamic State, 62 percent said that they definitely would not. And as we wrote earlier this year, we believe that this perception is an important reason why Americans aren't really worried about war with North Korea. Most Americans simply don't see going to war as something that affects them.

Second, and even more importantly, in this era of renewed great power competition, the United States may well find itself having to fight wars of greater size, scope, and casualties that require more troops than the nation can recruit voluntarily. A Russian invasion of the territory of a NATO ally like Estonia or Poland, a Chinese attack to subdue an unruly Taiwan, or even the need to replace thousands of U.S. casualties incurred in a new conflict with Iran or North Korea all could quickly exceed the capabilities of the all-volunteer force, even after the reserves have been fully mobilized. If a second clash erupted in the middle of one of these conflicts, it would place an impossible set of new and lethal global demands on an already stretched force. We cannot simply assume that a surge of patriotism will suddenly energize the youth of America to volunteer *en masse* to serve in future, bigger, and more lethal wars — even in the aftermath of a direct attack on the United States.

That means that conscription cannot be seen as simply an artifact of an earlier, less sophisticated time. Despite its deep unpopularity, there are some very important reasons why we still need the draft. Put simply, the size of American wars will not necessarily be confined to the number of volunteers that the United States can raise to fight them. The next big war may well require conscription to fight other

large militaries, replace casualties, and ultimately outlast the enemy. This sobering realization must be absorbed not only by the American people and their elected leaders, but by their military leaders as well. They too tend to avoid confronting the uncomfortable reality that conscription might be required to sustain a major future conflict.

U.S. citizens have many rights and responsibilities. The rights are better known to most Americans: freedom of speech and assembly; freedom to worship; and to seek out life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But the responsibilities of citizenship are less well understood. They include supporting and defending the Constitution; participating in the democratic process; and respecting and obeying federal, state and local laws. Yet among these responsibilities, only one requires risking life and limb — the defense of the republic. That is why it is the deepest obligation of citizenship. Yet today, most Americans citizens simply do not believe that it applies to them.

How can we strengthen and reinforce the principle that U.S. citizenship requires serving and defending the nation when called? One option might be instituting some sort of an oath-taking ceremony that mirrors the one undertaken by newly-naturalized U.S. citizens. Such a ritual could become part of Selective Service registration (which should expand to include women) or included at high school graduation ceremonies. That would reaffirm to all of those present that the responsibility and the risks of fighting America's wars belong to the population as a whole, not just to an ever-shrinking, committed cloister. Even just suggesting such a controversial proposal would spark a vibrant debate among students, teachers, and parents about the responsibilities of citizenship. This would be a small but important step to help close the nation's yawning civil-military divide while also highlighting and strengthening the other civic responsibilities of U.S. citizens.

This Memorial Day, many Americans will pause from their weekend barbecues and family get-togethers to remember those who have fallen defending the nation. Among those headstones dotting the well-manicured cemeteries at Arlington and in Normandy near Omaha Beach, in Manila and at the Punchbowl in Hawaii, lie thousands of Americans who were called from the rest of their lives to serve the nation at war. These promising, mostly young citizens never came back to those lives, or their families. Their headstones should remind us all that this ultimate sacrifice has always been the price of the nation's wars. And it has almost always been borne by the *entire* population of families across the nation, not just a patriotic few. Defending the nation in time of war remains the responsibility of all of us who call ourselves citizens of the United States — not just the job of a small warrior caste.

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