

Will there be a new military draft?

Why should we care?

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2020

There's been little public notice, but the U.S. is on the verge of its first major national debate about military conscription since the early 1980s.

A bipartisan National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service (NCMNPS) appointed in late 2016 by lame-duck President Obama and Congressional leaders has been studying whether the current requirement for all young men to register with the Selective Service System (SSS) for a possible military draft should be ended entirely, extended to young women as well as young men, or replaced with some other system of (possibly compulsory) military and/or civilian national service. (See "A New Right for Women: Eligible for the U.S. War Machine", *Fifth Estate* #397, Winter 2017.)

The NCMNPS will release its recommendations in March 2020, and Congress is likely to take up the issue after the 2020 elections.

What does this debate tell us about the state of the empire and its war plans? Will the government need a draft to fight its wars? And, if an actual draft is unlikely, why should anarchists or other anti-war activists care about draft registration?

Modern high-tech war-making calls for fewer soldiers with more specialized skills. Even some hawks see a cannon-fodder draft as obsolete or unnecessary, although some of them call for a special-skills draft (like the Doctor Draft during past wars) that would target people with cyber, STEM, and language skills as well as health care workers.

The SSS already maintains contingency plans for a Health Care Personnel Delivery System for workers in 57 occupational categories: nurses, dietitians, physical therapists, veterinary technicians, etc. The NCMNPS was specifically ordered by Congress to consider whether this should be expanded to other occupations.

Some supporters of war and the draft think that draft registration has become more trouble than it's worth. Former Selective Service Director Bernie Rostker, who oversaw the resumption of draft registration in 1980, came out of retirement to tell the NCMNPS that it's time to end draft registration. The current database of registrants would be "less than useless" as the basis for sending out induction notices (because so many registrants have moved without notifying the SSS), Rostker said. Trying to make women register would cause too many additional problems.

Members of the NCMNPS struggled to come up with plausible scenarios for when a draft might be needed. During one of the hearings at which I testified, Joe Heck, Chair of the NCMNPS (a former Republican congressman from Nevada, and Army Reserve Brigadier General) asked me what I would do if "we're in a Red Dawn scenario, we're being attacked through both Canada and Mexico," and there aren't enough volunteers to defend the U.S.?

It was the first time a draft resister was invited to tell Federal officials what they should do about the draft since David Harris testified at a Senate hearing in 1972.

The current Selective Service Director, Don Benton, an incompetent and corrupt early Trump supporter appointed to the position as a political sinecure where it was thought he could do little damage, and witnesses from



the military and hawkish think tanks were unable, even under questioning by the NCMNPS, to say in what circumstances a draft would be needed.

But these same witnesses—except Rostker—told the NCMNPS that draft registration should continue, even if they can't imagine when a draft would actually be necessary for one or more of these reasons:

1. Draft registration is “America’s insurance policy.”

Militarists are telling the truth when they say that they don't want a draft. A draft is Plan F for “fallback,” after Plan A (active-duty enlistees), Plan B (Reserves), Plan C (National Guard), Plan D (proxy warriors, a/k/a allied forces), and Plan E (mercenaries, a/k/a civilian security contractors). But it's the availability of the draft as a fallback that allows the government to contemplate endless unpopular wars without having to consider limits of scope, duration, targeting, or the willingness of people to fight.

A draft avoids the need to sell the war to the public, persuade people to enlist, or wait for them to do so—during which time they might figure out that the “existential threat” (the Vietnamese Navy in the Tonkin Gulf, Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, etc.) doesn't exist or isn't what it's been made out to be.

Without the draft as a fallback option, the government would have to recognize an entirely new set of constraints on its plans and ability to wage war.

2. Draft registration symbolizes and reinforces the duty of the individual to serve the state.

The NCMNPS has defined its goal as the creating of a culture and expectation of “service.” To put it in anarchist terms, draft registration is a symbolic ritual that inculcates the fascist ideal that the government determines what values people should serve, rather than serving people and their values.

3. Channeling: Draft registration channels the government's subjects into the roles and tasks—civilian and/or military—that the government decides will best serve its interests.

Much of the discussion of “service” by the NCMNPS was devoted to how the current Selective Service registration system could be modified, or with what sort of scheme it could be replaced, to channel more young people into doing what the government wants them to do.

Some members of the NCMNPS, and some witnesses at its hearings, had a fourth reason to support continuing draft registration and expanding it to women as well as men:

4. Requiring women to register for the draft would more fully integrate women into the military and the system of war-making.

But as the feminist antiwar organization CODEPINK said in a statement submitted to the NCMNPS, “Women's equality will not be achieved by including women in a draft system. It is irresponsible for the fight for women's rights to seek equal moral injury, equal PTSD, equal brain injury, equal suicide rates, equal lost limbs, or equal violent tendencies that military veterans suffer from. When it comes to the military, women's equality is better served by ending draft registration for everyone.”

All of this should give anarchists and many others sufficient reasons to oppose draft registration: to impose limits on war planning and war making, to end a ritual reinforcer of state paramountcy, to expand the freedom of young people to make their own choices, and to avoid subjecting women to even more of the burdens of war and conscription.

Finally, there's a fifth, unstated reason that statistis want to retain draft registration:

5. Ending registration would be a demonstration of the government's failure, and an object lesson in the power of popular resistance.

Registration became unenforceable in the face of quiet but widespread noncompliance. Statists are loath to admit that their power is limited by the willingness of the people to submit and obey, but the failure of draft registration—which would be made evident by its repeal—could empower and inspire other acts of resistance, especially by young people.

Edward Hasbrouck is an anarchist, pacifist, and ally of youth liberation. His “service” was four and a half months in prison in 1983 through 1984 for organizing resistance to draft registration. He maintains a website of information about the draft, draft registration, and draft resistance at **Resisters.info**.

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Fifth Estate #405, Winter, 2020

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