
Defense Report

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Draft Evasion Pardons—The Long Range Impact

In his rush to make good on a campaign promise to grant pardons to unpunished Vietnam-era draft evaders, President-elect Carter may be treading dangerously near foreclosing the possibility of ever again relying on Selective Service as a source of military manpower.

Beginning with the Civil War some form of conscription has been necessary in every major war the United States has fought. It has even been necessary to use the draft during some periods of strained peace. In recent years the pressure of the draft convinced many young men to choose the alternative of service in the Reserve components. As long as this pressure was there the strength of the National Guard and the various service Reserves remained high without any major diversion of effort to recruiting.

Now we have an All-volunteer active military establishment. It is composed of good people who are well-trained and well-equipped but it is very expensive. In fact, because of the expense of the active forces there has been a move to expand the roles played by the Reserve components and to integrate them more closely with regular combat elements. Reserve manpower is a great deal less expensive to maintain.

But, like a tiger spinning around with its own tail in its mouth, this reliance on the Reserves has brought the issue of the viability of the volunteer forces right back to its starting point—the question of whether we can economically keep our total forces up to strength without the draft.

For the first time in many months the Army failed to meet its October 1976 recruiting goal and the Air Force, which has been bathing in a sea of recruiting success for years is reporting more resistance to its recruiters. Concurrently the strength of all the Reserve components is plummeting in spite of all-out efforts by commanders to find recruits and retain trained personnel.

Congress has been critical of the Pentagon's tendency to "throw money" at problems and there is little expectation that simply spending more money will cure all the personnel ills of the total military force. It seems that draft pressure will have to reinforce the recruiting and retention blandishments already available.

By pardoning those who violated the selective service laws the last time they were used, Commander-in-Chief Carter will have established a dangerous precedent for disobedience of the law and avoidance of the tradition of service to the nation. It will be even more difficult for him or his successors to make selective service work in times of real crisis.