
Defense Report

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The Selective Service System—It Must Reflect the Will of Our “Friends and Neighbors.”

One of the unassailable strengths of the Selective Service System is its independence. In World War I, World War II and during the Korean War the system functioned smoothly and fairly, responding to requests from the Defense Department and its predecessor War and Navy Departments for specified numbers of men with acceptable physical and mental qualifications. Even during the late stages of the Vietnam War, once politicians came to the realization that they should not meddle in the system's functioning by mandating unfair deferments, Selective Service lived up to its historic reputation for impartial action by boards of friends and neighbors.

In the Washington bureaucratic pecking order the Selective Service System stands in the list of independent agencies, answerable solely to the President for policy guidance and the Congress for funding. It is fitting that an agency that literally holds the lives of millions of Americans in its file drawers and computers have that independence from appointed cabinet officers and be responsible only to the elected representatives of the people.

But the Carter Administration does not see it that way. A subelement of the President's Reorganization Project has already recommended that the Selective Service System be placed under an executive department. This recommendation was made in the face of strong arguments by the Association of the United States Army and other concerned organizations that independence is vital to the proper operation of the system. Now the Defense Department has embarked on a campaign to convince Congress to implement the reorganization recommendation.

This campaign seems to have its base in a desire on the part of the department to have better control of the entire personnel procurement function and to gain the whip hand over an agency that has been able to assert its independence from Defense Department influence. The barnyard-raiding fox is not satisfied with telling the farmer how many chickens he wants delivered but wants to climb into the chicken coop to make the selection. There is an inescapable aura of impropriety here that is sure to have a negative influence on public support of any future Selective Service operation.

When there is an opportunity to improve the functioning of any segment of the federal bureaucracy that opportunity should be exploited. But when an agency and a concept have operated as efficiently as Selective Service has—when left alone to do its job—there must be a more compelling reason for change than any demonstrated up to now by the White House or the Defense Department.