
Defense Report

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The Rediscovery of Selective Service— A Welcome Phenomenon

A number of things have occurred in the past few weeks that indicate renewed awareness of the Selective Service System and what it can and should do for the United States. During the early Viet Nam war years, the system was so unfairly operated as to make it a despised adjunct to an unpopular war. No congressman or responsible official would support a draft.

But with clearer insight that attitude is fading now as more and more people become aware of the impact the lack of a well-prepared Selective Service System has on our ability to defend ourselves. The active military forces are barely keeping their all-volunteer numbers at an adequate level and there is growing doubt that the overall quality of the volunteers meets desired standards. There is concern as well about the cross-section contribution of our total society. Lacking pressure from the draft the reserve forces, designed to bolster the combat power of our shrunken active units, are lagging behind needed strength, with the Army National Guard and Army Reserve dangerously below strength. What is left of the Selective Service machinery could not provide the numbers of draftees needed for any component in a meaningful time frame.

The Association of the United States Army has been pointing out this peril to our national survival for several years. We are encouraged by support from diverse directions. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General David Jones, recently went on record in favor of a system that could spring into action quickly enough to meet mobilization manpower needs. Rep. Melvin Price (D-Ill.), Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, released a report which pointed out the lack of mobilization capacity. Newspaper editorial writers across the nation have recognized the problem.

Perhaps most significant of all the indications, though, was the result of a Harris Poll which showed that a large majority of the American people (66%) would support the immediate registration of all young people between the ages of 18 and 28 to be available if needed. An even greater number (76%) felt that it would be healthier for the nation to have a pool of young people available to serve two years for training so we could have a manpower base to be drawn on in event of an emergency.

Of course any new activation of Selective Service would have to operate on the basis of purely random selection, with none of the prejudicial features that made the early Vietnam-era draft unfair. That is the only way it would be palatable and the only way it should ever have been operated. In that form it becomes a national asset instead of an anathema.