
Defense Report

AUSA



National Defense, The Military and the Draft — A New Surge of Popular Support

From time to time the nation's pollsters set out to plumb the depths of opinion concerning some of our most controversial issues. Their efforts are most helpful when they pry into some of the areas we tend to generalize about, with no real insight into what the public attitudes are. One of those areas is national defense, another is our military establishment and a third is the draft. Our newspapers and news broadcasts have recently contained many quotes from political candidates on these subjects but there has been little effort to balance those quotes against what the voting public thinks. Now we are able to do that.

For example, a recent poll by the Columbia Broadcasting System and the New York TIMES showed that 64 percent of those questioned were in favor of increased spending for national defense while only six percent opposed it. Contrary to the statements made by some politicians, this poll does not show any preponderance of sentiment in favor of increasing domestic programs. Just 24 percent favored increases, while 25 percent wanted decreases and 38 percent wanted domestic programs to remain at the present level. A National Broadcasting Company and Associated Press survey in January, 1980 showed 58 percent favoring increased defense spending.

The American public puts more confidence in its military establishment than in any of the other institutions designated in a recent Harris Poll. Thirty-three percent of the respondents indicated that they put "a great deal of confidence" in the military. The familiar faces on the television news broadcasts came a close second at 31 percent while the White House and the Congress brought up the bottom of the list at 18 and 11 percent respectively. The extent of the public confidence in the military is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that military leaders and the military as an institution rarely have the kind of direct access to the people available to television news personalities and politicians.

And in an atmosphere of uncertainty on Capitol Hill about the need to rebuild our Selective Service machinery and to register potential selectees, it is important to note that the general public does not share that uncertainty. The January poll taken by NBC and the Associated Press reflects a 75 percent support level for the resumption of draft registration and 62 percent in favor of renewing the actual call-up of draftees. No longer should any legislator be able to say unequivocally that the public would not support a return to the draft.

The pollsters' timing could not have been better. The Congress is now well into its scrutiny of President Carter's defense budget for the next fiscal year and is holding hearings on plans to increase the funding for the Selective Service System and for draft registration. The polls have taken away the easy path of rejecting these proposals with the baseless statement that, "The people will never support that." The support is there. The people's wishes are known.