
Defense Report

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Universal Service—A Cop-Out, Not a Solution

How should we get the bulk of the people we need to fill the ranks of our military services? Some say we should pay whatever is necessary to lure volunteers, while others say the answer is to randomly select the military noncareerists from the population of young men—and women—who reach service-eligible age each year. A third group, unwilling to pay the price in dollars needed to support pure volunteerism and also unwilling to pay the political price of supporting the draft, say the neatest answer is to create a system of universal service. This device, they say, will fill the military ranks, provide manpower for all kinds of worthwhile projects and, best of all, be totally fair.

At the present time, about four million young men and women reach the age of 18 each year. Assuming a standard length of service under a universal plan of two years, the armed forces would need about 300,000 new noncareer people each year, leaving an annual increment of 3.7 million 18-year-olds for whom some proper employment must be found. Also, there would have to be some mechanism for selecting the 300,000 universal trainees to be assigned to the military. The most frequently heard solution to that problem is to have a system of special incentives to make military service a better deal than clearing forests or washing bedpans. This is no different from what we are doing right now. We would simply be recruiting from among the universal service population.

Universal service advocates also tend to overlook the cost of such a program. The people would have to be clothed, fed and housed and should be given some kind of small cash allowance for necessities (an allowance of only \$50 per month for four million people amounts to \$200 million). A bureaucracy would have to be created to administer the universal service force which, again assuming a two-year period of service, would be almost four times as big as our current armed forces.

But the big question about universal service is whether we can find productive employment in public sector projects for almost eight million people without displacing a large number of people who are now making their livelihood in those jobs. Universal service is not an operable answer to our military manpower problems.