



LANDPOWER ESSAY SERIES



No. 93-6

August 1993

THE NEED FOR A SELECTIVE SERVICE SYSTEM

by

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Last month the House of Representatives took a giant step backward in its constitutional obligation to “provide for the common defense.” The members voted to delete \$24 million from the Fiscal Year 1994 budget of the Selective Service System, leaving \$5 million for the purpose of closing the agency down. An amendment to the Veterans Administration, Housing and Urban Development and Independent Agencies Appropriations Bill would have restored \$20 million for the Selective Service but was narrowly defeated by a mere five votes — 207-202. Fortunately, there is still time for our nation’s senators to correct this error by voting to restore Selective Service funding.

Retention of the Selective Service System is good for the nation on two counts. First, it is needed to undergird the results of the National Military Strategy review now under way by the Clinton administration. Second, it is consistent with the ideal of selfless service to our great nation.

Secretary of Defense Les Aspin is completing his very important “bottom-up” review which will shape the Clinton presidency’s national military strategy for years to come. For certain, the size of the nation’s military forces will shrink below the Bush administration’s levels. An educated guess would be that 11 aircraft carriers will be preserved, 20 tactical fighter wings will be preserved and the number of Army divisions will be reduced, probably to ten divisions, some of which will be rounded out by National Guard units.

The net result is fewer forces in being — active, National Guard and Reserve. With fewer forces in being, the size of the pool of soldiers who have completed their military service and are obligated for recall in an emergency will begin to shrink. Soldiers with previous military service were recalled during the Persian Gulf War to provide for replacements in the event of large-scale casualties, which were projected but did not, thank God, materialize. It doesn’t take much imagination to posit what could have happened had Saddam Hussein used his chemical weapons or effectively massed his SCUD missiles to understand the appalling number of casualties that might have been.

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The smaller the force structure, the less room we have for error in force calculations. Weapons of advanced technology and mass destruction are available in the world arms market. Third-, fourth- and even fifth-rate armies can obtain small quantities of highly lethal weaponry that could inflict substantial levels of casualties on U.S. forces. We know that nine countries are now capable of delivering nuclear warheads. Several countries possess weapons armed with chemical and biological warheads.

A functioning Selective Service System is an important backstop should our forces suffer unexpected casualties. The ability to rapidly call young men to duty for training could, indeed, deter wrong-headed despots from using weapons of mass destruction against our forces. Thus, an in-being Selective Service System becomes a meaningful part of our deterrence system as we overhaul our concepts of meeting the security challenges of the 21st century.

Could we expand our military in time of crisis without Selective Service or peacetime registration? Today, with the Selective Service Agency fully funded and with ongoing peacetime registration, the first draftee could be serving in uniform within 13 days of receiving authorization to return to a draft. It would take 42 days if peacetime registration ends and all other elements of Selective Service remain in place. But, if the entire agency and all its programs are terminated in accordance with the 28 June House vote, a future draft would have to start from scratch. It could take a year or more to get it going again. First, personnel to administer the program would have to be hired and trained, forms printed, computer hardware and software redeveloped and a mass registration program devised and implemented. Selective Service would have to be reinvented from the ground up and all of this would take valuable time that might not be available in a crisis.

The second reason we should retain the Selective Service registration system has to do with the normative aspects of citizenship. At age 18, young men now register to vote. That's great! With the right to vote comes a larger responsibility to serve the republic. Enrollment in the Selective Service System is just one of those responsibilities — to rally to the national defense if necessary. American youth have been demonstrating their citizenship with a 97 percent compliance rate in Selective Service registration. Kudos to the young men of our country who seem to know and respect one of their many obligations of citizenship.

Keeping a viable Selective Service System might best be compared to purchasing a home fire extinguisher. You make the initial investment and keep it in a place where you can get to it readily in a crisis. You are ready to operate it but hope you never have to. You don't hesitate to pay to have it recharged. You don't throw it away just because you have not had a fire for a few years.

This congressional action is not finalized. The Senate can reverse this incautious action by the House. On August 12, 1941, less than four months prior to Pearl Harbor, the House of Representatives voted to extend the draft with a one-vote majority. Hopefully, this Congress can have the same courage and farsightedness. Otherwise, like a homeowner, we may one day find ourselves at the mercy of a conflagration without a fire extinguisher. Let us not be "penny-wise and pound-foolish." Let us insure America's mobilization capabilities and preserve the Selective Service System.

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