

**Testimony before the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service
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Universal Service Hearing: Should Service be Mandatory?

Lucy Steigerwald

Dear Chairman Heck and members of the Commission:

I appreciate being asked to offer my perspective on the question of whether any kind of national service should be mandatory for Americans.

I am a working journalist and editor. I have more than seven years studying and writing on two issues -- criminal justice and foreign policy. Both of those topics have an application to the question of today, because they relate to peace, choices, freedom, and punishment. Namely, mandatory national service does not support peace, it certainly does not involve freedom or choice, and it is a punishment for a crime not committed.

So it is with great respect that I intend to spend my time describing why the answer to “should service be mandatory” is no.

Mandatory national service is a solution in search of a problem. Like any people, anywhere, at any time, Americans have their share of problems. But that is nothing that mandates grand central planning.

An 18-year-old has just spent 12 years in school, and 18 with their parents. The door to adulthood is opened, and they are urged to step through. Grabbing them by the arm and dragging them to a time and place selected by a bureaucracy will not help them become grown ups. Teaching them that it’s time for them to leave their hopefully loving parents and make their own choices in life, until the government comes calling, is a mixed message at best.

How many hand-wringing headlines and sarcastic memes do we need about “kids today” before we realize that just like any other human being, they’re trying to find their own paths? If we believe that younger generations -- mine included -- are being infantilized and are permanently stunted and lacking in the skills of adulthood, why would we advocate for a program that tells them where to go, what to do, and for long?

The Commission has noble intentions in trying to make the country better, and to encourage people to be a part of something greater -- a selfless cause. However, noble intentions do not make great policy. More importantly, is even a good idea good if it’s mandatory? Mandatory not for children who need a bedtime, but for young adults who already have their own ideas, plans, and dreams for their lives. Mandatory for young adults that, again, are constantly being mocked for being sheltered and weak on one hand, then being bossed on the other.

When pondering this kind of question, equality always demands to be part of the equation.

In 2019, it feels strange to make men shoulder the responsibility of Selective Service registration alone. Women make up a fifth of the military, perhaps they should be part of the group that will go when they are called to war. Restrictions on women and gay individuals have been lifted. Perhaps, the commonly understood draft, if it ever came to one again, should cover men, women, gays, trans people, and everyone else -- a perfect cross-section of America.

Perhaps, then, if conscription is to be equally-applied, so should this idea of national service apply to all people (at least those of draft age).

The argument has been raised in various ideological corners that an all-volunteer military makes wars easier for Americans to ignore. Most Americans are more disconnected to foreign policy than they ever have been before. Furthermore, economic pressure would be less of an incentive for people to join the military if it was simply what every person has to do.

These concerns are all valid, but a grand experiment in coercion is not the way to fix inequalities. Abolishing the coercive program in question -- in this case, the Selective Service -- is the better answer.

During Vietnam, the last war in which men had to service, over 60,000 of them died (to say nothing of 2 million Vietnamese). A quarter of those men were officially drafted, but unknown numbers joined up if only to be able to pick their military branch. The fact of the matter is that the classically-defined conscription says one thing to young men -- you are the property of the state, and you will kill and you will die to prove that.

Furthermore, though the picture of 1960s antiwar protests might be appealing to those who wish for a more humble American foreign policy, the reality is that though the draft led to a backlash against the war, those 60,000 Americans and 2 million Vietnamese died before it stopped.

The draft is immoral in times of war -- and during the endless war on terror, well, that's now, isn't it? The draft says that your desire to live, and your principles against killing another human being can be revoked at any time. Translating its coercive elements to a more benevolent form of top-down action may make "doing your bit" more palpable. However, the principle and the application risk being one and the same.

The argument that the citizen owes something to the state has taken varying forms across history and geography. Its darkest iterations are those that have denied completely that the individual is a category at all.

Only individuals make choices. These choices include making families, working, and joining groups. Sometimes individuals voluntarily join a group or cause that they or others believe is in service of the country. Sometimes that looks like joining the military, the Peace Corps, or just cleaning up a park. Social pressure from school, work, or family can influence these decisions. However, the reality is that the individual has the first and final choice.

With respect, nobody, not this Commission, not any bureaucracy anywhere knows what's best for anyone else, no matter how young they are. And again, when you stake a claim in a young person's life during peacetime (if that is what we have in America), you have them on the hook during war time, or "national emergency" as well.

Washington, DC is very far away from most Americans. Even their state or local governments are probably unfamiliar, and in most cases unaccountable to their wishes. And hey, you might argue that that's the problem! There is the issue right there, and it can be solved by forcing a large cross-section of people of people to work together for a greater purpose. Plus, polarization, and politicalization, and a lack of respect for diversity and etc. -- all of this could be solved!

Things may feel more tense and divided in America today, and forcing groups of people to work together could mandate a certain amount of cooperation. It will not fix the larger problems, and the larger questions that arise about race, gender, sex, politics, and everything else. Some people might enjoy this process, some people might be appalled and resistant. Why start with the premises of coercion, mandatory action, an idea that the young owe something to the government, or at worst are its property? Why do we start with force if the idea is good enough?

A greater purpose is a lovely thing. It is also a subjective thing. And a purpose is not great simply because it involves a large group of people all doing the same thing.

More to the point, individuals need to find their own purpose.

And when they don't choose that greater purpose, that's ok, too. That's their prerogative to be lost, to play too many video games, and to wonder where they fit into life. If it isn't, what's the point of having a choice?

America prides itself on being exceptional, in part because of our Constitutional protections of individual freedom. Passing a nationwide mandate that would control the lives of 35 million Americans, even if for only a year or two, would wound that deeply.

In the words of the great abolitionist, antiwar, and proto-feminist philosopher Lysander Spooner:

"Man, no doubt, owes many other moral duties to his fellow men; such as to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, care for the sick, protect the defenceless, assist the weak, and enlighten the ignorant. But these are simply moral duties, of which each man must be his own judge, in each particular case, as to whether, and how, and how far, he can, or will, perform them."

Furthermore, the "fatal conceit" of believing in a centrally-planned movement such as this is a dangerous one. In its most benevolent version, say, young people working in homeless shelters or hospitals, it is still upending someone's life, and controlling their location and their actions for a year or more. It is an assumption that you, the general you of a Commission or a board, know better than I, the young person who has my own ideas about how I wish to spend my life. Good,

bad, selfless, or selfish, my life plans were mine, and they have been taken away. Someone presumes to know better what I should be doing, and indeed knows me so well that they think they know how I can best serve the country.

In its least benevolent version, this is a short-term indenture of 35 million Americans. How will the practical applications work? Will a certain number of them have to join the military? Will they be given half a dozen “choices” as to where they wish to spend their year? What stake will industries such as healthcare, or defense, or law enforcement have in this process? Will they lobby for the choicest, strongest, smartest candidates? Will the less impressive be janitors and ditch-diggers?

Individuals are not a resource to be picked clean. They will be treated as such under mandatory national service.

There is no social contract. There is no equation that says exactly what I must commit to the local, state, or federal governments, or what we owe to our friends and loved ones. But one thing’s for certain -- individuals know better than bureaucrats they’ve never met.

What we owe to each other is an important question that cannot be answered by government committee. What we owe to the state is easier to answer -- nothing. I would happily give money to welfare, to immigrants, to other causes I deemed worthy. I do not get that choice. My money goes to wars and to a government that spies on me. Now my money could go for a massive program of benevolent, well-intended indentured servitude. I would rather not work to fund that, much as I would prefer not to fund the federal government’s other mistakes.

When I was 18 I would have reacted to being forced to serve the state the same way I would react today -- with disgust, anxiety, and anger. The best cause I could imagine would turn sour if I were forced by law to participate in it.

You might argue that this contrariness is the kind of immaturity that a program of national service could remedy. I would argue that that kind of contrariness is the American spirit, if such a thing exists. More importantly, it is the human spirit that relishes choice, freedom, and opportunity. That kind of freedom breeds greatness -- and ordinariness -- in individuals. Millions of people prove every day that whatever they choose, however their lives go, they should remain their own, because they are no one else’s.