

“The Draft”  
by Milton Friedman  
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The arbitrariness and deficiencies of our present method of manning the armed forces are highlighted by the recent directive ending automatic exemption for hitherto protected occupations and automatic deferments for most graduate students (the exceptions are students already in their second year or beyond, and students going into medicine, dentistry and related fields or into the ministry).

Academic administrators are expressing great concern that graduate-student enrollments will decline sharply and that teaching assistants will be scarce. This concern would be fully justified if all the young men who would have been deferred or exempted under earlier rules will in fact now be drafted—except of course for those who do not meet physical or mental standards or are granted status as conscientious objectors.

But arithmetic plus the needs of the military assure that this will not occur. The number of young men added to the eligible rolls is at least double the number who will be drafted. Supposedly, the oldest are to be drafted first. If that were done, all of the new draftees would be in their middle 20s, and most would be college graduates. Not one of the roughly 2 million young men turning 18 would be taken. Would the military be satisfied with this outcome? If there be conscription, it is certainly inequitable to give special treatment to young men who go to college. But, on the other hand, is soldiering one of the occupations for which college graduation should be a prerequisite? Is that a reasonable use of our manpower?

What is likely to happen is that, by one expedient or another, most college graduates and persons now exempt on occupational grounds will continue to be deferred. Public pronouncements will be one thing, practice another. But that does not mean that the pronouncements do no harm. On the contrary, hundreds of thousands of young men will be subjected to needless uncertainty and distress. They will find it more difficult to get employment because of the risk that they will be drafted. Employers will be induced to get along with less satisfactory employees. Thousands of colleges will take measures that will prove unnecessary or harmful. We shall have another striking example of the defect of compulsion as a method of deciding which young man shall serve in the armed forces and which two or three or four shall not.

Over a year ago, I wrote in this column that “a military draft is undesirable and unnecessary. We can and should man our armed forces with volunteers—as the United States has traditionally done except in major wars” (*Newsweek*, Dec. 19, 1966).

In the interim, Congress has passed a bill extending conscription for another four years, yet there has also been increasing recognition of the defects of conscription. The case for a voluntary system has been presented in testimony before Congressional committees. Several bills have been introduced in both the Senate and the House providing for the early transition to a fully voluntary system of manning the armed forces.

Three books on the subject have recently appeared: "The Draft," which summarizes a conference held at the University of Chicago in December 1966 and presents evidence on all the alternatives (edited by Sol Tax, University of Chicago Press); "How to End the Draft," by five congressmen (edited by Douglas Bailey and Steve Herbits, National Press, Inc.); and "Why the Draft?" by seven young men connected with the University of Virginia (edited by James C. Miller III, with an introduction by Senator Brooke, Penguin Books). These books demonstrate that conscription is neither necessary nor desirable, that it is entirely feasible to man our armed forces by voluntary means provided the military stop underpaying new recruits and take effective steps to make a career in the services more attractive. These books consider and meet every objection that has been raised to a voluntary army.

Draft or no draft, this country would be now engaged in a searching debate over Vietnam. But the virulence and the divisiveness of the debate have been greatly increased by the draft, with its threat to civil liberties and with its closing of all alternatives except open revolt to young men who disagree strongly with our policy. Must we continue to add to the strain on our society by using a method of manning our armed forces that is inequitable, wasteful and basically inconsistent with a free society?

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