

“A Volunteer Army”
by Milton Friedman
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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.

Only a minority of young men now enter the armed forces. Hence, some method of “selective service”—of deciding which young man should serve and which two or three should not—is inevitable. But our present method is inequitable, wasteful and inconsistent with a free society.

On this point there is wide agreement. John K. Galbraith and Barry Goldwater, the New Left and the Republican Ripon Society have all urged that conscription be abolished. Even most supporters of the draft regard it as at best a necessary evil.

The draft is inequitable because irrelevant considerations play so large a role in determining who serves. It is wasteful because deferment of students, fathers and married men jams colleges, raises the birth rate and fuels divorce courts. It is inconsistent with a free society because it exacts compulsory service from some and limits the freedom of others to travel abroad, emigrate or even to talk and act freely. *So long as compulsion is retained, these defects are inevitable.* A lottery would only make the arbitrary element overt. Universal national service would compound the evil—regimenting all youth to camouflage the regimentation of some.

Two principal objections are made to a volunteer force:

(1) That a “professional” army endangers political freedom. There *is* a real danger, but it arises from a strong armed force not from the method of recruiting enlisted men. Napoleon and Franco both rose to power at the head of a conscript army. However we recruit, the essential need is to maintain close links between the officer corps and the body politic.

(2) That a volunteer army is not feasible because, at present terms, too few men volunteer. Little wonder: the starting pay, including cost of keep, is about \$45 a week! We could readily attract more volunteers simply by paying market wages. Estimates of how much total military pay would have to go up vary from \$4 billion to \$20 billion a year.

Whatever the extra amount, we are now paying a larger sum in concealed form. Conscription is a tax in kind—forced labor exacted from the men who serve involuntarily. The amount of the tax is the difference between the sum for which they would voluntarily serve and the sum we now pay them—if Joe Namath were drafted, his tax might well run into hundreds of thousands of dollars. The real cost of manning the armed forces now, *including this concealed tax*, is greater than the cost of manning a volunteer force of the same size because the volunteers would be the men who find military service the most attractive alternative.

Moreover, a volunteer force would need fewer recruits. We now waste manpower by high turnover, unnecessary training and retraining and the use of underpaid servicemen for menial tasks.

Adding to cost, low pay for men in service encourages extravagant veterans' bonuses—currently more than \$6 billion a year (over 40 per cent as much as total military pay). Young men seeking shelter from the draft impose unnecessary costs on colleges and universities. Other young men fritter away their time in stopgap jobs awaiting conscription, while industry seeks men to train.

The monetary savings that would come from abolishing conscription are dwarfed by even greater nonmonetary advantages: young men could arrange their schooling, careers, marriages and families in accordance with their own long-run interests; draft boards could be freed from the appalling task of choosing which men should serve, deciding claims for conscientious objection, ruling whether young men may leave the country; colleges and universities could be free to pursue their proper educational function; industry and government could hire young men on their merits not their deferments.

One of the greatest advances in human freedom was the commutation of taxes in kind to taxes in money. We have reverted to a barbarous custom. It is past time that we regain our heritage.

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