The case for abolishing the draft—and substituting for it

An All-Volunteer Army

By MILTON FRIEDMAN

Marine volunteers at Parris Island, S. C.—"Conscription," declares the author, "is both undesirable and unnecessary."

THE present legal authority for conscripting men into the armed services expires June 30. It is no accident that it expires in an odd-numbered year. That was deliberately contrived to make sure that renewal of the draft would come up when neither Congressional nor Presidential elections were pending. Hitherto this stratagem has worked like a charm—the draft was renewed in 1955, 1959 and 1963 with hardly a ripple of public concern or opposition and with only perfunctory Congressional hearings.

This year, the committees with primary responsibility—the armed services committees headed in the Senate by Senator Richard Russell and in the House by Representative Mendel Rivers—have been, as always, holding hearings, but this time their hearings have been more than a pro forma endorsement of Gen. Lewis B. Hershey and the Selective Service System. President Johnson has suggested major changes in the operation of the draft—that we take the youngest men first, cut student deferments and introduce a lottery selection system. But everyone seems to want to get in on the draft act.

Senator Edward Kennedy has chaired a Labor and Public Welfare subcommittee that has held hearings on the effect of the draft on manpower problems. The Joint Economic Committee, headed by Senator William Proxmire, has touched on the same subject in its hearings on the effect of Vietnam on the economy. Senator Mark O. Hatfield has introduced a bill that provides for the early transition to a fully voluntary system of manning the armed forces. Representatives Donald Rumsfeld and Thomas Curtis have introduced a bill calling for a Congressional study of the feasibility of terminating the draft soon. A Council for a Volunteer Military, sponsored by individuals covering the political spectrum from right to left, has just been formed. And so on and on.

The passions engendered by Vietnam clearly explain why the renewal of the draft is not a routine matter in this odd year of 1967. But the interesting thing is that a man's position about the draft cannot be inferred from his position about the

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war. Both men who favor stronger military action and men who favor a bombing pause in the North or even complete withdrawal have come out in favor of terminating the draft and relying on volunteers to man the armed forces. In the past several months Barry Goldwater has devoted three of the columns he writes to urging that conscription be ended and that it be ended now. Norman Thomas and James Farmer have both taken the same position. John Kenneth Galbraith, new head of Americans for Democratic Action, has long been an articulate and effective opponent of the draft. Fortunately, belief in personal freedom is a monopoly of neither Republicans nor Democrats, of neither conservatives nor liberals.

THERE is by now wide agreement that the present system of conscription is defective and must be changed —even General Hershey has given in. Highly placed voices — including those of Sargent Shriver and Willard Wirtz; more ambiguously, Robert McNamara, and most surprisingly, anthropologist Margaret Mead—have urged a system of universal national service, in which all young men (and, if Miss Mead has her way, all young women as well) would be conscripted and assigned to a variety of tasks, one being to serve in the military.

There is far less recognition that while the President's proposals would improve the operation of conscription, *no system relying on compulsion can remove the basic defects of the present draft.* In current circumstances only a minority of young men are needed to man the armed forces. Short of letting men decide for themselves, there is no equitable way of determining which young man should serve and which two or three should not. Short of making the armed forces offer conditions that attract the men it needs, there is no way of avoiding waste and misuse of men in the armed forces, or the use of men in the military who would contribute far more in civilian activities.

And, of course, any system involving compulsion is basically inconsistent with a free society. A lottery would only make the arbitrary element in the present system overt. Universal national service would compound the evil—regimenting all youth to camouflage the regimentation of some.

The continued use of compulsion is undesirable and unnecessary. We can and should man our armed forces with volunteers. This is the method the United States has traditionally used except in major wars. The past two decades are the only exception. It is time that we brought that exception to an end.

THE ADVANTAGES OF A VOLUNTARY ARMY

EVEN in strictly military terms, a voluntary force would be more effective. It would be manned by people who had chosen a military career, rather than partly by reluctant conscripts anxious only to serve out their term. It would have much lower turnover, freeing men for military service who are now spending their time training others or being trained. Intensive training, a higher average level of skill, the use of more and better equipment, would permit military strength to be raised while the number of men in the services was reduced. Not least of the advantages of a volunteer force is its effect on morale. Military service is now demeaned, treated as a necessary but degrading duty that men have to be dragooned into performing. A voluntary army would restore a proper sense of pride, of respect for the important, dangerous and difficult task that the armed forces perform.

The elimination of compulsion would enhance the freedom of all of us. The young would be free to decide whether to serve or not to serve. Members of draft boards would be relieved of the awful task of arbitrarily deciding how a young man shall spend several of the most important years of his life—let alone whether his life shall be risked in warfare. The tormenting and insoluble problem now posed by the conscientious objector would disappear. We could immediately dispense with investigating the innermost values and beliefs of those who claim to be conscientious objectors—a process entirely repugnant to a society of free men.

CONSCRIPTION has been used as a weapon—or thought by young men to have been so used—to discourage freedom of speech, assembly and protest. The freedom of young men to emigrate or to travel abroad has been limited by the need to get the permission of a draft board (if they are not to put themselves inadvertently in the position of being a lawbreaker). Uncertainty about the draft has affected the freedom of young men to plan their schooling, their careers, their marriages and their families in accordance with their own long-run interests.

"To attract more volunteers, we would have to improve conditions of service . . . Existence of conscription means the military have to pay little heed to enlisted men's needs."

Manning the armed forces with volunteers would have other real advantages for the country at large. Colleges and universities could pursue their proper educational function, freed alike from the incubus of young men—probably numbering in the hundreds of thousands—who would prefer to be at work rather than at school, but who now continue their schooling in the hope of avoiding the draft; and from controversy about issues strictly irrelevant to their educational function. We certainly need controversy in the universities—but about intellectual and educational issues, not whether to rank students or not to rank.

The community would benefit from a reduction in unwise early marriages contracted at least partly under the whip of the draft, as well as from the associated decline in the birth rate. Industry and government would benefit from being able to hire young men on their merits, not their deferments. Not least, the level and tone of public discussion might be raised—though this is perhaps simply an expression of my innate optimism.

Some of these advantages would also result from substituting a lottery for present methods of selection—but only in part, and only for those who are clearly selected out.

IS A VOLUNTARY ARMY FEASIBLE?

IS it not simply wishful thinking to suppose that we can abandon conscription when a hot war is raging in Vietnam, when we must maintain armed forces exceeding 3 million men in total? Men are now free to volunteer, yet the number who do so is clearly inadequate and, moreover, many volunteer only because they expect to be drafted. The number of "true" volunteers is clearly much too small to man armed forces of our present size. This undoubted fact is repeatedly cited as evidence that a voluntary army is unfeasible.

It is evidence of no such thing. It is evidence rather that we are now grossly underpaying our armed forces. The starting pay for young men who enter the armed forces is less than $45 a week — and that sum includes not only cash pay and allotments, but also the value of clothing, food, housing and other items furnished in kind. The starting pay is virtually the same now as in 1950—but prices are higher, so in terms of goods and services the man who enlists gets considerably less now than he did then. All of the pay raises since then have gone to officers and to enlisted men with longer terms of service. They have to be induced to stay in service. Fresh recruits can be conscripted — so why raise the pay?

Little wonder that volunteers are so few. Most young men can earn twice as much in civilian jobs.

TO attract more volunteers, we would have to improve conditions of service. This means higher entering salaries. But it also means better housing facilities and improved amenities in other respects. The existence of conscription means that the military need pay little attention to the wants of the enlisted men — if not enough volunteer, press the button

and General Hershey will raise draft calls. Indeed, it is a tribute to the humanitarianism of the military—and the effectiveness of indirect pressures via the political process—that service in the armed forces is not made even less attractive than it now is. But ask any ex-G.I. how attractive that is.

Money is not the only, or even the major, factor young men consider in choosing their careers. Military service has many nonmonetary attractions to young men—the chance to serve one's country, adventure, travel, opportunities for training, and so on. Today, these attractions are offset not only by low pay but also by the very existence of compulsion. Military service is now synonymous with enforced incarceration. And the presence of young men who are in the armed forces only because they are forced to serve hardly contributes to a spirit of pride within the service.

Improved pay, better conditions of service, and imaginative personnel policies, both in attracting men and using them, could change drastically the whole image which the armed services present to young men. The Air Force, because it has relied so heavily on "real" volunteers, perhaps comes closest to demonstrating what could be done.

The coming of age of the young men born in the postwar baby boom has provided a steadily increasing number of persons eligible for military service. The best estimates are that, to man voluntary armed services of our present effectiveness, only about one-quarter or less of all young men would have to see some military service. This percentage is much lower than the corresponding percentage at the time of Korea, when low birth rates of the Depression years were making themselves felt. It is also much lower than the percentage who must see service under conscription, because volunteers serve longer terms on the average.

A RECENT poll of college students—brought to my attention by Senator Edward Kennedy when I was testifying before his committee earlier this spring—showed a large majority who favored a voluntary army, but an even larger majority who said they would not themselves volunteer. Is this not, the Senator in effect asked, evidence that a volunteer army is not *feasible*?

The answer is no. The young men are answering in terms of conditions as they now are. And, of course, at present terms and conditions, their answer is correct—and who can blame them? They do not know how they would behave if conditions were different, if service in the armed forces were made much more attractive.

The question of how much more we would have to pay to attract sufficient volunteers has been scrutinized intensively in a Department of Defense study of military recruitment. Based on a variety of evidence collected in that study, Prof. Walter Oi of the University of Washington, who worked on the study, has estimated that a starting pay (again including pay in kind as well as in cash) of something like $4,000 a year—about $80 a week—would suffice. This is surely not an unreasonable level of pay. Oi estimates that the total extra payroll costs (after allowing for the savings in turnover and men employed in training) would be about $3 billion to $4 billion a year for armed forces equivalent to 2.7 million men under present methods of recruitment, and not more than $8 billion a year for armed forces equivalent to the present higher number of men (3.1 to 3.2 million).

Using the same evidence, the Defense Department has come up with estimates as high as $17.5 billion. This is an incredible figure—it would mean that the pay of every man in the armed service from the newly enlisted man to the top general could be *raised* by $6,000 a year. But even that absurd estimate is not unfeasible in the context of total Federal Government expenditures of more than $170 billion a year, and military expenditures of over $70 billion.

In any event, we do not need precise estimates of what it will take to attract enough men. Out of simple justice, we should raise the pay and improve the living conditions of enlisted men. If we did so, the number of "real" volunteers would increase, even while conscription continued. Experience could then show how responsive volunteers are to the terms offered, and by how much the terms would have to be improved to end conscription.

DRAFT RIOTS in New York City—from a wood engraving in The New York Illustrated News, Aug. 8, 1863. Conscription in the U. S. dates from the Civil War; peacetime conscription was introduced in 1940.

A VOLUNTEER ARMY WOULD COST LESS

THE need to raise pay to attract volunteers leads many to believe that a volunteer army would cost more. The fact is that it would cost less to man the armed forces by volunteers than it now costs to man them by compulsion—*if cost is properly calculated*. The cost listed in the Federal budget might be higher—though even that is not certain. But the real cost to the community would be far lower.

The real cost of conscripting a soldier who would not voluntarily serve on present terms is not his pay and the cost of his keep. It is the amount of money for which he would be willing to serve. Compare, for example, the real cost to a star professional football player and to an unemployed worker. Both might have the same attitudes toward the army and like—or dislike—a military career equally. But because the one has so much better alternatives than the other, it would take a much higher sum to attract him. When he is forced to serve, we are in effect imposing on him a tax in kind equal in value to the difference between what it would take to attract him and the military pay he actually receives. This implicit tax in kind must be added to the explicit taxes imposed on the rest of us to get the real cost of our armed forces.

If this is done, it will be seen at once that abandoning conscription would almost surely reduce the real cost—because the armed forces would then be manned by men for whom soldiering was the best available career, and hence who would require the lowest sums of money to induce them to serve. It might raise the apparent money cost to the Government but only because it would substitute taxes in money for taxes in kind.

The implicit tax in kind is not a light one. If it were proposed that we impose a special income tax of 50 per cent on enlisted men in the armed services, there would be cries of outrage. Yet that is what we are now doing in concealed form. Abolishing

conscription would have the great merit of imposing those taxes on the rest of us, where they belong, not on the young men in uniform.

THERE are some important offsets even on the level of budgetary costs. Volunteers would serve longer terms, a higher fraction would re-enlist, and they would have a higher average level of skill. The armed services would waste fewer manhours in training and being trained. Because manpower is cheap to the military, it now tends to waste it, using enlisted men for tasks badly suited to their capacities or for tasks that could be performed by civilians or machines, or eliminated entirely. Again, ask any ex-G.I. for evidence.

Better pay at the time to volunteers also might lessen the political appeal of veterans' benefits that we now grant after the event. These now cost $6 billion a year or one-third as much as current annual payroll costs for the active armed forces — and they will doubtless continue to rise under present conditions.

THE RACIAL COMPOSITION OF VOLUNTEER FORCES

ONE objection that has been voiced against volunteer forces is that they would be staffed predominantly by Negroes because a military career would be so much more attractive than the other alternatives open to them.

There is first a question of fact. This tendency is present today in exaggerated form—the present levels of pay are *comparatively* more attractive to Negroes than the higher levels of pay for voluntary forces would be. And this shows up in a much higher rate of re-enlistment by Negroes than by whites. Yet the fraction of persons in the armed forces who are Negro is roughly the same as in the population at large. It has been estimated that even if every qualified Negro who does not now serve were to serve, whites would still constitute a substantial majority of the armed forces. And this is a wholly unrealistic possibility. The military services require a wide variety of skills and offer varied opportunities. They have always appealed to people of different classes and backgrounds and they will continue to do so. Particularly if pay and amenities were made more attractive, there is every reason to expect that they would draw from all segments of the community.

The Negroes in the forces tend to have lower skills than the whites. As a result, they constitute a larger fraction of the combat units than of the armed forces in general. The fraction of the men in combat in Vietnam who are Negro is decidedly higher than their proportion in the population. Yet even there, they are a small minority of the fighting men. More important, most of them are there by choice: because they voluntarily chose to enlist or re-enlist.

This raises the basic question of principle. Clearly, it is a good thing not a bad thing to offer better alternatives to the currently disadvantaged. The argument to the contrary rests on a political judgment: that a high ratio of Negroes in the armed services would exacerbate racial tensions at home and provide in the form of ex-soldiers a militarily trained group to foment violence. Perhaps there is something to this. My own inclination is to regard it as the reddest of red herrings. Our Government should discriminate neither in the civil nor in the military services. We must handle our domestic problems as best we can and not use them as an excuse for denying Negroes opportunities in the military service. We should be proud of the armed forces for the fine job they have done in providing opportunities to the disadvantaged and for eliminating racial discrimination—not discriminate against the Negroes in manning the armed forces because we have done so much less well in civilian life.

THE FLEXIBILITY OF VOLUNTARY FORCES

ANOTHER argument that has been made against voluntary forces is that they lack flexibility—and that world conditions may change and call for larger or smaller armed forces. With conscription, draft calls can be rapidly stepped up, and conversely.

This is a real problem—but can easily be overrated. Emergencies must be met with forces in being, however they are recruited. Many months now elapse between an increase in draft calls, and the availability of additional trained men.

The key question is how much flexibility is required. Recruitment by voluntary means can provide considerable flexibility—at a cost. The way to do so is to make pay and conditions of service more attractive than necessary. There will then be an excess of volunteers — queues. If the number of men required increases, the queues can be shortened, and conversely.

The change in scale involved in total war is a very different matter. If the military judgment is that, in such a contingency, there would be time and reason to expand the armed forces manifold, either universal military training to provide a trained reserve force, or stand-by provisions for conscription could be justified. Both are very different from the use of conscription to man the standing army in time of peace or brush-fire wars like that in Vietnam which require recruiting only a minority of young men.

The flexibility provided by conscription has another side. It means that, at least for a time, the Administration and the military services can proceed fairly arbitrarily in committing U.S. forces. The voluntary method provides a continuing referendum of the public at large. The popularity or unpopularity of the activities for which the armed forces are used will clearly affect the ease of recruiting men. This is a consideration that will be regarded by some, including myself, as an advantage of the voluntary method, by others as a disadvantage.

MANEUVERS at Fort Meade, Md., before World War II. "An all-volunteer army would free men for military service who otherwise spend their time training reluctant conscripts."

ARE VOLUNTARY FORCES A POLITICAL DANGER?

A FINAL objection that has been raised against a volunteer army is that it would endanger political freedom. There is a real danger, but it arises from the existence of large armed forces plus the industrial complex required to support them, not from the method of recruiting enlisted men. Our free institutions would certainly be safer if the conditions of the world permitted us to maintain smaller armed forces. But they are not made safer by using compulsion rather than free choice to fill the ranks.

The military coup just engineered in Greece was by an army manned by conscripts. So was the recent military takeover in Argentina. Napoleon and Franco rose to power at the head of conscripts. Britain and the U.S. have maintained freedom while relying primarily on volunteers; Switzerland and Sweden, while using conscription. It is hard to find any relation historically between the method of recruiting enlisted men and the political threat from the armed forces.

The danger to liberty comes from the officers, who are now and always have been a professional corps of volunteers. However we recruit enlisted men, it is essential that we adopt practices that will guard against the political danger of creating a military officers corps with loyalties of its own and out of contact with the broader body politic. Fortunately, we have so far largely avoided this danger. The broad basis of recruitment to the military academies, by geography as well as social and economic factors, the R.O.T.C. programs in the colleges, the recruitment of officers from enlisted ranks, and similar measures, have all contributed to this result.

For the future, we need to continue such a broad recruitment policy. We need also to foster lateral recruitment into the officers corps from civilian activities — rather than rely primarily on promotion from within. The military services no less than the civil service need and will benefit from in-and-outers. For the political gain, we should willingly pay the higher financial costs involved in fairly high turnover and rather short average terms of service for officers. We should follow personnel policies that will continue to make at least a period of military service as an officer attractive to young men from many walks of life.

There is no way of avoiding the political danger altogether. But it can be minimized as readily with a volunteer as with a conscripted army.

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THE case for abolishing conscription and recruiting our armed forces by voluntary methods seems to me overwhelming.

We should at once raise the pay of enlisted men, improve conditions of service and stimulate more efficient use of manpower by the services. We should continue to raise the pay until the number of "true" volunteers is large enough so that the lash of compulsion can be eliminated. And to avoid procrastination by the military, who will be tempted to continue to rely on the crutch of conscription, we should set a definite termination date for conscription. ■