



The False Promise of Universal National Service

Doug Bandow

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America is divided. Some people hope for a simple answer. A few even see war as a model for bringing people together.

Over the years there have been many notable universal national service advocates. The 2020 presidential campaign brought forth proposals for civilian conscription from Democratic candidates including South Bend Mayor (now Transportation Secretary) Pete Buttigieg. Susan Rice, of both the Obama and Biden administrations, also is a fan.

It's a bizarre idea. America's national government was not given such authority, for good reason. Civic virtue comes from below, not above. As Alexis de Tocqueville famously observed in *Democracy in America*: "I have seen Americans making great and sincere sacrifices for the key common good, and a hundred times I have noticed that, when needs be, they almost always gave each other faithful support."

However, voluntarism did not satisfy newer authoritarian, collectivist impulses articulated by the philosopher William James in his famous 1906 speech on The Moral Equivalent of War. "Our gilded youths would be drafted off," he declared, "to get the childishness knocked out of them, and to come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas."

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This desire for social engineering endures. In 1979 the Committee for the Study of National Service, co-chaired by Harris Wofford, who was later elected to the U.S. Senate, opined: "Millions of young people serve social needs in China as a routine part of growing up, many [are] commanded to leave the crowded cities and to assist in the countryside. ... The civic spirit being imbued in youth elsewhere in the world leaves some Americans wondering and worrying about Saturday-night-fever, unemployment, the new narcissism, and other afflictions of American youth."

Is America's choice really between Mao and disco?

National service is a bad idea. To start, the 13th Amendment bans “involuntary servitude.” The Supreme Court sustained military conscription during a war declared by Congress, but there is no similar justification for a civilian draft in peacetime.

Nor is there a good policy argument for such a program, especially on a national scale. Political elites possess no unique abilities to diagnose and remedy the failings of the young. Indeed, it would be obscene to exempt the former, who are most responsible for the bitter political divisions in the nation’s capital, from serving.

Equally important, national service would fail in practice. Advocates of national service typically produce long lists of “unmet needs” with specific numbers of extra workers desired in such areas as conservation, education, health care, and, more recently, COVID and climate change. However, the demand for labor is infinite if treated as free.

Nor is impressing millions of untrained, indifferent, and sometime hostile young people—roughly four million turn 18 every year—a sensible way to fulfill specialized tasks. Better to hire qualified and committed people directly. There also is a significant opportunity cost to turning young people’s lives over to the state. The real expense is the value of their work or study foregone, and there is no reason to presume that a grand new federal bureaucracy is better qualified than them to run their lives.

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And imagine what would be required to manage millions of conscripts. Contra the vision of program advocates, conveniently too old to “serve,” many young people would not be enthused about being denounced for their selfishness, criticized for their sloth, lectured on their ingratitude, and dragged away from their homes to be ordered around by sanctimonious, vote-minded politicians. What happens when some of the newly drafted laborers act in ways that would get them fired from any private job. Lecture them? Arrest them? Quote Mao Zedong about serving the masses? Or just give up, don’t worry, and be happy?

In the end, these sorts of proposals have less to do with solving problems and more to do with using force to mold people into someone else’s preferred image. Compulsory compassion is supposed to force moral transformation. Alas, it is magical thinking that the state can round up 18-year-olds, march them, like Mao’s Red Guards, across America, and turn them into moral, caring, selfless adults committed to national unity and other liberal verities.

However, if advocates really believe what they are preaching, why not start with America’s political, commercial, social, and cultural leaders? In the late 19th century Edward Bellamy published a novel, *Looking Backward*, that promoted a nearly lifetime draft and gained many followers at the time. Those proposing national service programs should be the first people conscripted and given the honor of doing the most difficult and unpleasant tasks.

Service is good. However, conscripted labor is not real service. America faces serious challenges that require commitment and sacrifice to solve. The answer is not mandatory national service imposed by the old on the young.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. He is a former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan and the author of several books, including Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire (Xulon) and Human Resources and Defense Manpower (National Defense University).