

# The Washington Post

## Save America: Restore the draft

By [Dana Milbank](#)

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At this time of Thanksgiving, I'm grateful for the U.S. military — not just for the usual reason that it protects us from our foes but also because it has the potential to save us from ourselves.

As I make my rounds each day in the capital, chronicling our leaders' plentiful foibles, failings, screw-ups, inanities, outrages and overall dysfunction, I'm often asked if there's anything that could clean up the mess.

My usual answer is a shrug and an admission that there's no silver bullet. There are many possibilities — campaign spending limits, term limits, nonpartisan primaries, nonpartisan redistricting, a third party — but most aren't politically or legally feasible, might not make much of a difference or, [as with Harry Reid's rewriting of Senate rules](#), have the potential to make things even worse.

But one change, over time, could reverse the problems that have built up over the past few decades: We should mandate military service for all Americans, men and women alike, when they turn 18. The idea is radical, unlikely and impractical — but it just might work.

There is no better explanation for what has gone wrong in Washington in recent years than the tabulation done every two years of how many members of Congress served in the military.

A Congressional Quarterly count of the current Congress finds that just 86 of the 435 members of the House are veterans, as are only 17 of 100 senators, which puts the overall rate at 19 percent. This is the lowest percentage of veterans in Congress since World War II, down from a high of 77 percent in 1977-78, according to the American Legion. For the past 21 years, the presidency has been occupied by men who didn't serve or, in the case of George W. Bush, served in a capacity designed to avoid combat.

It's no coincidence that this same period has seen the gradual collapse of our ability to govern ourselves: a loss of control over the nation's debt, legislative stalemate and a disabling partisanship. It's no coincidence, either, that [Americans' approval of Congress](#) has dropped to just 9 percent, the lowest since Gallup began asking the question 39 years ago.

Because so few serving in politics have worn their country's uniform, they have collectively forgotten how to put country before party and self-interest. They have forgotten a "cause greater than self," and they have lost the knowledge of how to make compromises for the good of the country. Without a history of sacrifice and service, they've turned politics into war.

Compulsory military service, as old as Athenian democracy and common in countries such as Israel that live under threat, has been in decline in Western Europe since the end of the Cold War. But an exception, Switzerland, is instructive: On Sept. 22, [the Swiss voted 73 percent to 27 percent](#) to keep their conscription army. It has less to do with security than with national identity in a land of 26 cantons and four official languages. [The government argued that military service](#) teaches people "how to live and work with compatriots from all regions, all linguistic groups and all social strata," which "contributes enormously to the national cohesion."

In Switzerland, the sons of bankers and farmers alike do basic training for several months and then are recalled to service for brief periods. But the structure is less important than the service itself. My former colleague Tom Ricks proposes bringing back the draft in the United States but allowing for a civilian national service option — teaching, providing day care and the like — for those who don't want to join the military.

There's no mass movement for mandatory service, but the idea has gained a diverse group of supporters, including retired Gen. Stanley McChrystal and [Rep. Charlie Rangel](#) (D-N.Y.). Gun-rights groups would cheer an armed citizenry, and an article published by [the libertarian Cato Institute argued](#) that compulsory service "can be a pillar of freedom."

The costs would be huge. But so would the benefits: overcoming growing social inequality without redistributing wealth; making future leaders, unlike today's "chicken hawks," disinclined to send troops into combat without good reason; putting young Americans to work and giving them job and technology skills; and, above all, giving these young Americans a shared sense of patriotism and service to the country.

It would take some time, but this new generation of Americans, once again asking what they can do for their country, would undo much of the damage today's crop of self-interested leaders is doing to our politics.