

Expand the Role of the Citizen-Soldier Without a Draft

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For proponents of American liberty, a volunteer military has always been preferable to conscription. Friends of liberty have appropriately asked how, in a supposedly free country, you can justify unfairly shanghaiing, against their will, an unrepresentative minority of the population—young men—for dangerous service in usually undeclared and often unnecessary wars. Yet although the presence of conscription does not seem to prevent U.S. entry into questionable wars—for example, the Korean and Vietnam Wars—it does seem to create a peace lobby to end such debacles.

As much as friends of liberty would like to avoid the realization, a majority of the American people have long ago abandoned support for the wars and Iraq and Afghanistan, yet have not been willing to pressure the Republican government of George W. Bush or the Democratic government of Barack Obama to shut them down. The 2006 election was a clear verdict on Iraq, bringing antiwar Democrats to power in Congress, yet U.S. forces will still be in Iraq through 2011—and likely longer. The 2008 and 2010 election campaigns have not been driven by the wars. Recently, the ever anemic antiwar movement has been virtually non-existent. Why?



Although opposition to the wars among the American people is substantial, it is not near anywhere as intense as during the Vietnam War because there is no conscription. No middle class kids are being dragged unwillingly from their studies or civilian employment to fight and die in strange and faraway lands for dubious ends. Instead, the two wars are being fought by a limited number of volunteer professional soldiers, many from families with a military tradition who are accustomed to duty and sacrifice. These soldiers have had to endure multiple deployments—often four or five—to the war zones.

So there is something to the argument that the U.S. professional soldier is becoming disengaged from the society that he or she is supposedly fighting to protect. This argument is usually heard to trumpet the “citizen-soldier” in order to bring back the draft. But citizen-soldiers can probably act as at least some sort of brake against the military adventurism of politicians. A case in point is that repeated call-ups of part-time reservists (Army National Guard members and Army Reservists) for multiple combat tours have caused much heartburn and squawking in Congress.

After the Vietnam War, the U.S. military decided to try to make it harder for interventionist politicians to involve the military in overseas quagmires by putting key support functions in the National Guard and Army Reserves. The thinking was that a war would really have to be important for the president to make the politically fraught decision to mobilize the reserves. It was a nice try, but support troops—that is, those who do intelligence, logistics, civil affairs, etc.—are not perceived to be in the same danger as combat troops.

Perhaps the answer to bringing the military back into line with the society it’s supposed to be defending and to expanding the ranks of citizen-soldiers (National Guard and Army Reserve soldiers can already be so labeled), while avoiding a return to the slavery of conscription, is to convert active units to reserves.

In today’s world, the U.S. military should be chasing terrorists (only after law enforcement efforts have failed or against a clear, imminent, and dangerous threat), not occupying Islamic countries and fighting insurgents, thus making the problem of blowback anti-U.S. terrorism worse. No military threat from another great power currently exists and won’t likely arise for decades (even assuming China continues to grow economically at its current unsustainable pace).






Therefore, five divisions of the U.S. Army should be converted to part-time National Guard units. Of the three active and one reserve Marine divisions, two of the active units should be converted to reserve units. These five Army and two Marine divisions and other existing Army National Guard combat divisions and the other Marine Reserve division should receive increased training to be ready as a hedge against an unlikely dust-up with another great power. Mobilizing these combat units would require much more political risk for the president than just sending citizen-soldiers to support active-duty soldiers.

Some of the five remaining divisions in the U.S. Army, the remaining Marine division, and a full complement of Army Special Forces and Rangers could be kept on active duty to hunt terrorists by conducting rapid raids or other specialized missions in inhospitable terrain.

Thus, a much smaller active ground force should deter politicians from using the Army and Marines in dubious brushfire wars, while retaining the capacity to mobilize heavier combat forces in case of national emergency and, all the while, increasing the ranks of citizen-soldiers without reinstating the draft.

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