

THE WEEK

America's military draft is an assault on liberty. End it.

Bonnie Krisian

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In 1964, Donald Trump was 18 years old. He did not go to Vietnam. Instead, he went to college, and then to the doctor, where he acquired a note that would justify his fifth and final draft deferment.

The first four deferments were for education, one annually for each year of his undergraduate studies — during which time the young Trump was an avid athlete, playing football, tennis, squash, and golf — and the last for bone spurs in his feet. "I had a doctor that gave me a letter — a very strong letter on the heels," Trump recounted to *The New York Times* in August. "They were [heel] spurs," he added. "You know, it was difficult from the long-term walking standpoint. [It was] not a big problem, but it was enough of a problem."

Since then, Trump says, his heels have healed. He is, in the words of a more recent doctor's letter, in "astonishingly excellent" health.

Whatever Trump's motivations for seeking those deferments may have been — career goals, political views, simple fear, or even, *I suppose*, heel pain — I do not judge him for that choice. As a woman, I am for now spared the draft's chill grasp, but were its reach extended to my sex I would register as a conscientious objector.

And five decades on, it is difficult at best to argue that those who went to Vietnam (I say this as a Vietnam veteran's daughter) were wiser than those who dodged. The war's cruelty and futility are now widely recognized; the Vietnam War finds few public defenders and has become an epithet for ill-advised foreign interventions. Trump himself has labeled the Vietnam War "yet another disaster for our country" in addressing his deferrals, though he insists he would have been proud to serve had his number been called.

All this history becomes relevant, of course, because we are just days away from Donald Trump becoming president. Now, the United States has had plenty of presidents with no military career, and even, in the likes of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, presidents who took similar steps to avoid wartime service. But Bush and Clinton were both fundamentally conventional presidents in a way the incessantly unconventional Trump is not.

Where their political careers would have sunk, his has soared. Where they would have bitten their tongues, he has wagged his. Political leanings aside, these former presidents were both conservative in a way Trump is not in that they mostly maintained Washington as they found it.

In short, where a Bush or a Clinton might lack the interest or political will (particularly in the face of opposition from military brass) to shutter Selective Service altogether, Trump might not — and should not.

Not only is draft registration a superfluous, anachronistic program in the digital era, but the draft has no place in an ostensibly free society. It ought not be controversial to say that a government which claims to defend human rights should not be able to forcibly send its citizens to kill and be killed. (The older term — "conscription" — communicates the tyrannic nature of Selective Service in a way the more neutral "draft" does not.) As Ronald Reagan argued in a 1980 letter, forcing Americans into military service "destroys the very values that our society is committed to defending." It is anathema to the liberty of the individual.

For some, like me, who are critical of aggressive U.S. foreign policy, the draft's one merit is that it could in theory give Washington pause before entering America into a large-scale conflict. If Sen. Smith and Rep. Jones must send their sons into harm's way, the logic goes, perhaps they will not vote for a foolish war.

But Trump's own history shows that is wishful thinking. The wealthy and well-connected will always be afflicted with bone spurs, while the poor and powerless will typically lack a helpful family doctor. Furthermore, as the Cato Institute's Christopher Preble argues at *The Washington Post*, this idea "overlooks the fact that few, if any, of our conflicts in the first two decades of the post-conscription era could be considered protracted ground wars, and likewise cannot explain why other countries around the world with volunteer militaries are far less war-prone than we." If Washington is determined to go to war, it will not be the draft or lack thereof that makes the difference.

Should Trump add nixing the draft to his agenda, it could be a relatively easy sell to the Republican-controlled Congress. He can cast it as part of his plan to get rid of unnecessary government expenditures. Eliminating an entire federal program, if properly pitched, ought to have the GOP salivating.

Dumping the draft can even be fairly explained as military reform for a stronger defense. As Preble writes, "a draft would likely reduce the military's fighting effectiveness," throwing away resources on soldiers with no long-term commitment to the military. It would mostly serve to make our fighting force larger, not better suited for success in modern warfare.

If our president-elect is serious about "draining the swamp," helping the little guy, and improving U.S. defenses, ending the draft should be near the top of his to-do list.