



# Drafting People Into the Moral Equivalent of War

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## The False Promise of Universal National Service

War fires the imagination, especially of those who never suffered its horrors. Washington, D.C.'s faux heroes find nothing so courageous as sending other people off to fight and die in one grand cause or another.

Of course, some professionals glory in death and gore, such as World War II's Gen. George S. Patton. In his infamous speech to the Third Army he declared: "Men, all this stuff you hear about America not wanting to fight, wanting to stay out of the war, is a lot of horse dung. Americans love to fight. All real Americans love the sting and clash of battle."

However, better-grounded commanders recognized the horror of conflict and were pained by the tragedy of which they were part. Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee viewed the spectacle of tens of thousands of northern troops in formation launching a doomed assault on his position at Fredericksburg, Virginia and observed: "It is well that war is so terrible, lest we should grow too fond of it." At war's end he accepted the presidency of Washington College: he refused to attend war commemorations, counseled against erecting battle memorials, and urged fellow southerners to reconcile with the North.

In life, more people follow Lee than Patton. War rarely proves popular beyond an initial burst of enthusiasm. The number of men (mostly) enlisting typically drops sharply after the initiation of hostilities. So in the 19<sup>th</sup> century most modern warfare states turned to conscription.

However, after decades of a peacetime draft, America returned to voluntarism in 1973. The All-Volunteer Force delivered the highest quality armed services in American history, but support for compulsion persisted. Enthusiasm for conscription typically was strongest on the Right. Left-leaning activists were more likely to promote mandatory civilian programs labeled "national service." Some progressives used war imagery to sell their ideas.

The 2020 presidential campaign featured proposals for civilian conscription by Democratic candidates South Bend Mayor (now Transportation Secretary) Pete Buttigieg and former congressman John Delaney. A former staffer in the George W. Bush administration, Bradley A. Blakeman, joined in, urging creation of a Department of National Service which would screen "All youth aged 18-22 ... for aptitude and placement."

Susan Rice, the former national security adviser back at the White House handling domestic policy, also is a fan of a universal draft. She allowed: "I wish we could have mandatory national

civilian service in this country, so that every kid between the age of 18 and 21 spent six or 12 months in national service, whether it's laying broadband or building infrastructure, or rehabilitating inner-city schools and libraries."

The tasks she suggested were mostly mundane. As with other national service fans, what most attracted her was the opportunity to engage in social engineering. Rice presented the standard Kumbaya image: "The reason I think service is so important is, not only is it creating economic opportunity in training and skills for those who may not otherwise have them, but most importantly, it's teaching us to understand and to know each other as Americans across different geographic, racial, socioeconomic lines, as part of one nation and one community."

The idea of universal conscription continues to attract adherents. Charli Carpenter, a professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, last year argued for a draft to battle COVID-19. She asked "why isn't compulsory service on the menu of policy options right now? The United Nations refers to this pandemic as the gravest threat since World War II. In a military crisis of this magnitude, young men have in the past been called up and trained virtually overnight to perform numerous skilled jobs in the armed forces or in the civil service. Young women have been mobilized as well – into the military, the medical corps, or factory work. But today many talented, civic-minded young adults are earnestly doing the only thing being asked of them: sitting at home feeling isolated, anxious, and (quite understandably) slighted."

Coming more from the right, retired Army Col. Lawrence Wilkerson last month advocated a climate change draft. He wrote: "It was inevitable that the climate crisis – arguably the most catastrophic crisis the United States, indeed, the world, is facing – arose as one of the several force-defining threats the forum has addressed that might require the country to resume conscription. Millions of young, healthy, dedicated, well- and socially-trained men and women will be required to manage both the domestic and the international threats created by this crisis." Wilkerson imagined a "climate change corps" modeled on the (voluntary) Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s.

Additional push for social engineering comes from Lilliana Mason of the University of Maryland: "We need to be reintroduced to each other in a place where we are all on the same team. And we need to do so at an age when political identities are most powerfully shaped. College-age Americans are both the most politically flexible, and the ones who have the greatest stake in bridging a divide that has brought democratic progress to a standstill." If something is good, everyone must be forced to do it!

Similarly, Eric Liu of Citizen University complained: "We are self-absorbed, self-centered, self-seeking society whose civic muscles are atrophying rapidly and whose sense of common purpose is disappearing. We are easily divided by foreign adversaries. We are tweeting and texting our way to disunion." Happily, he had the answer: "there's a single fix that can reverse this atrophy and generate an inclusive sense of shared destiny: mandatory national service."

The presumption that millions of COVID-bound young people are sitting at home angry and frustrated that the authorities have yet to round them up, seize control of their lives, force them to work for pennies, and transform them into something else might seem unusual, but over the last 150 years more than a few wannabe social engineers have proposed similar schemes based on the presumption that the masses would be only too happy to turn their lives over their political

betters. Advocates have included such notables as Ted Kennedy, Randolph Bourne, Pete McCloskey, Sam Nunn, Robert McNamara, Margaret Mead, and John McCain.

Conscription, whether military or civilian, is a bad idea. Early Americans had mandatory, but local, militia service. National military conscription was largely reserved for supposed military emergencies, most notably the reality or threat of large-scale land wars – Civil War, World War I, World War II, and the Cold War.

A draft for civilian service was simply beyond imagination in the early republic. After all, the national government had no such authority and there was no lack of public spirit. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Alexis de Tocqueville famously described the young nation's culture, people, philosophy. As he wrote 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."

Alas, views began to change as Progressives sought to overturn belief in America as a constitutional republic, a system of ordered liberty in which individual rights were protected and government was limited. A new, arbitrary, authoritarian, and even virulent collectivist impulse emerged.

Perhaps the most bizarre manifestation of this sometimes totalitarian philosophy was the 1888 novel *Looking Backward*, in which Edward Bellamy created a perverse utopia in which people spent a quarter of a century working for the state. Americans oddly entranced by this authoritarian conception of the future created scores of clubs to promote Bellamy's vision, which finally arrived after a fashion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century's totalitarian death states.

Less comprehensive but of greater infamy was the philosopher William James' 1906 speech on "The Moral Equivalent of War." The result was a social engineer's delight. The benevolent elite would uplift the worthless young, turning the latter into a better social product. The means? Mandatory national service managed by beneficent, prescient intellectuals like James. He asserted that "the martial virtues, although originally gained by the race through war, are absolute and permanent human goods," and that coerced "service" by government should be used to spread these vital values in peacetime. "Our gilded youths would be drafted off," he explained, "to get the childishness knocked out of them, and to come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas."

The title of James' essay became an oft-repeated phrase, introducing many a national service and other policy proposal. For instance, President Jimmy Carter labeled his energy program the "moral equivalent of war." However, James did not offer a namby-pamby, wimpy-liberal, feel-good, sanctimony-affirming, girlie-man, squishy-progressive initiative to make young people feel positive vibes about themselves and those around them. There would be no pretense of Blakeman's screening for "for aptitude and placement."

Rather, James wanted civilian service to be as much like war as possible. He explained:

"The military ideals of hardihood and discipline would be wrought into the growing fiber of the people; no one would remain blind, as the luxurious classes now are blind, to man's relations to the globe he lives on and to the permanently sour and hard foundations of his higher life. To coal and iron mines, to freight trains, to fishing fleets in December, to dishwashing, clothes-washing, and window-washing, to road-building and tunnel-making, to foundries and stoke-holes, and to

the frames of skyscrapers would our gilded youths be drafted off, according to their choice, to get the childishness knocked out of them, and to come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas."

James's vision was brutal social engineering, pure and simple. He knew what was good for you, by God, and you would do it! This idea continues to appeal to totalitarian wannabes the world over who imagine the great good they could achieve by rounding up 18-year-olds and remaking them as God, the proletariat, nature, the anointed, providence, or someone/something else intended. Some intellectuals, apparently distressed at America's emphasis liberty, even suggested looking abroad for tougher examples abroad to mimic. 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:

*International comparisons also fire some American imaginations. 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. Castro fought illiteracy and mosquitoes in Cuba with units of youth. Interesting combinations of education, work, and service to society are a part of the experience of youth in Israel, Jamaica, Nigeria, Tanzania, and other nations. 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.*

Maybe presenting such a vision in the US could be excused by the times. It was only three years after Mao Zedong's death – and the end of China's Cultural Revolution, a crazed combine of civil war and party purge that killed a million or more people. The truth of that inglorious experience, highlighted by emptying schools and sending students out to "serve" Mad Mao in his dotage, was not yet fully known in the West.

Similarly, Cuban authoritarianism probably looked better before the dramatic Mariel boatlift, in which perhaps 125,000 Cubans fled Castro's purported paradise for Florida. It seems the vision of totalitarian communism creating a "new man" could still inspire social engineers seeking an American version. Today it should be evident to all but the most clueless that crazed collectivism is not the solution to anything. Yet some intellectuals continue to spend their lives promoting bloody totalitarianism to remake humanity – and are feted for doing so.

Modern variants of mandatory national service remain all about social engineering. This new generation of self-anointed Vestal Virgins asserts that its members possess unique ability and standing to recognize America's grievous flaws, which are always centered in the next generation, those "wondering and worrying about Saturday-night-fever." And the answer always, in every circumstance, is to conscript members of this selfish younger cohort – but no one else, all of whom apparently have overcome the system's dangerous perversions.

However, one should be skeptical of any activist peddling panaceas. The case of national service is no different. There is so much wrong with this idea. If Americans are selfish and myopic, why trust the person seeking to control other people's lives? Why would everyone older than 18 be exempt from this diagnosis and treatment? It is ever so convenient for those in established authority to blame everyone else for society's serious ills. One is reminded of Jesus' admonition that we should remove the plank from our own eye before attempting to withdraw the splinter from someone else's eye.

There also is a constitutional problem. The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment bans "involuntary servitude." And mandatory service is, well, mandatory. Which means involuntary. During World War I the Supreme Court gave the military draft a pass. But there is no similar historical or security justification for a civilian draft. Such a program is entirely alien to American values and experience.

The policy case for civilian conscription is even weaker. At least the military is truly a form of national service, as in laboring for the country. Civilian "national service" is mostly a countrywide aggregation of individual or community service. No matter how useful, shelving books, cleaning bedpans, managing parks, and doing whatever else is defined by government as "service" are not "national" service in any meaningful sense.

Moreover, the idea is economic and policy foolishness. The classics of the national service movement – and there are many, such as Peter Szanton's and Richard Danzig's *National Service: What Would It Mean?* – offer long lists of "unmet needs" in educational, health care, and other fields, as well as the exact number of extra workers required in each. But these are fantasy claims which mean nothing without considering cost. Ask the typical nonprofit how many employees it could use if they were paid by the government, and the number would be huge. The demand for free or cheap labor is well-nigh infinite.

The opportunity cost of such programs would be particularly great. That is, the real expense is the value forgone – people finishing educations, doing volunteer work that better suits their talents and interests, more quickly entering life-saving careers, and more. Even if civilian conscripts were addressing "real" needs, it would make far more sense to hire people qualified and interested in specific tasks than annually round up four million or more untrained, disinterested, and/or hostile 18-year-olds. Recent proposals for a COVID or climate change draft are particularly daft.

Consider what Carpenter imagines doing with millions of teenagers. She wrote: "Some draftees could be trained as nursing assistants and emergency medical technicians, like those grossly overworked first responders driving ambulances or providing support work where patients are treated. Some could be put to work by the Army Corps of Engineers and help build new hospitals. Some could staff food banks and other civil society organizations to support vulnerable families hit by the downturn so that older, more at-risk volunteers could stay safely at home. Some could fill in on converted or makeshift factory assembly lines to rapidly build masks and ventilators – just like young people were mobilized to build munitions in the past. Some could help on farms, where a lack of labor risks shortages of certain foods. Many would receive special training to be safely put to work sanitizing, cleaning, and clearing."

Sure, people could be taught to do these different tasks. That is precisely what happens in the private economy every day. In fact, many people already are engaged in such activities. So why create a new bureaucracy to draft the unwilling and ill-suited to do everything from manufacturing to farming to driving to construction to nursing to most everything else?

The same goes for adapting to climate change. Conscripting millions of teenagers who want to be somewhere, anywhere else in the world to perform a wide variety of specialized tasks available in the marketplace is an awful, even stupid, idea. Imagine trying to create the administrative structure necessary to sort through, categorize, train, distribute, and oversee millions of conscripts. How likely are the "right" people to end up in the "right" jobs?

And what to do with millions of potential undeclared refuseniks? Carpenter might imagine that America's 18-year-olds are today eagerly waiting for her to arrive, upbraid them on their sloth, lecture them on their selfishness, drag them away from their homes, order them around, and decide their futures, but that idea runs contrary to experience. In reality, she would have to contend with national servers who hated their jobs, tuned out instructors, cut classes, ignored instructions, insulted coworkers, went backpacking, performed carelessly, talked back, came in late, resisted orders, stayed home, and engaged in other conduct for which they would be fired by a normal employer.

Then what? Send them to "work" anyway? Lecture them on the wonders of social engineering? Call the cops? Yell at them? Head to a "safe space" filled with crayons and coloring books? Have a drink? Toss them in jail? Write a whiny blog post about the selfish young frustrating her wonderful plan for national rejuvenation? Quote Mao Zedong and Fidel Castro about serving the masses? Or just give up and let what happens happen?

In the end, these sorts of proposals have less to do with solving problems, whether pandemic, climate change, or something else, and more to do with using compulsion to mold people into someone else's preferred image. Solving problems becomes an excuse for social engineering. Yet the belief that this process would turn participants into good, patriotic, compassionate, sympathetic, moral, serious, generous, warm, sensitive, adorable human beings, as so many advocates of national service expect, is simply fantastic.

To start, compulsory compassion is an oxymoron. Government coercion can force behavioral compliance, not moral transformation. Nor are most civilian conscripts likely to be impressed by ivory tower theorists who proclaim that everyone else is selfish and must be coercively re-engineered. It is magical thinking to believe that the state can round up every 18-year-old, turn them into moral automatons and productive workers, and send them, like Mao's Red Guards, marching across America to transform the nation on demand.

However, if advocates really believe what they are preaching, why don't they go large? Why stop with teenagers and mundane jobs? Edward Bellamy imagined a lifetime, or almost, of service. William James envisioned serious, gritty service. So why not draft 30-year-olds and 40-year-olds too? "Real" national service should set lengthy terms, say 10 or 15 years, to make sure the moral lessons really take root. And include the toughest tasks – police, fire protection, bomb squads, mountain rescue, factory work, and all the "dirty jobs" performed by television's Mike Rowe. Most important, *insist that those proposing the programs be the first people inducted – no excuses! – and given the honor of doing the very toughest tasks.* That would build real character for the rest of us to see and model.

Americans have always known that service is good. They lead the world in their willingness to fill the famed "little platoons" that help meet the many personal and social problems that bedevil any society. Whatever the proper role for government, it is not to politicize and militarize service. One key characteristic of the U.S. is the fact that service is and should remain private and voluntary. Which makes it moral and effective. And ensures that it is really service.

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