

Conscription: Between the Horns

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In the previous issue of the *Quarterly*, William A. Galston and Robert K. Fullinwider engaged in debate on the merits of conscription. The day after I read their competing articles for the first time, Internet service provider America Online (AOL) carried on its "Welcome Page" the following headline, "Is war worth 87 million? Bush tells us we must sacrifice." Although the presidential speech the previous weekend had concentrated on monetary sacrifice, other more important sacrifices are asked for. The night I read the articles posted on AOL I realized that it was the first time in awhile that I did not see another one, two, or three portraits of dead US military personnel that typically end the nightly news program, the Jim Lehrer "Newshour." Since these memorials put a human face onto what otherwise might be a dry and academic debate, it is appropriate to begin a deliberation of Galston's proposal for universal service conscription with consideration of the faces involved.

I doubt that I am the only person in the US who is sick at heart to witness this regular and morbid parade of dead youth across our screens. One learns from the accompanying captions that these individuals are primarily of blue collar and rural extraction, and for the most part barely out of their teenage years. This is extremely sad. Yet more dismaying perhaps is that some *are* older. These are the fathers. One or two in their fifties are possibly grandfathers. The pictures of young women killed are harder still to bear.

These are men and women who have entered the service of their country in what is probably for most a commendable attempt at self-improvement tempered by a strong ethic of public service. They are engaged in a very difficult mission devised by an administration remarkably impenetrable to civil debate. They are posted in a hostile country with a bad climate many thousands of miles from home—in many cases away from their own young families. That some of them are injured, while others are killed is a consideration that seems to me to outweigh all others. Whatever our beliefs about the war, they are dying in our service. This mortality is not, as some eminently liberal Washingtonian friends opposed to the war recently tried to convince me at a dinner, a minor consequence

of the chosen profession of the people involved. The wounding and dying are not the failure of OSHA (the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which regulates worker safety) but is the closest thing to sacred that a secular state can observe. Harm, and even death, is, or should be, a deliberate and careful act of sacrificial self-defense on the part of a threatened democratic state. (If it is not, then the deaths of several hundred Americans and British, and those of thousands of Iraqis and others now should weigh on the consciences of the authors of the war.)

The Unfair Burden

If my words seem overly passionate, there is reason for them. I have some personal experience with all this. Enlisting at seventeen in the British Royal Air Force, for more than six years I served in comparative happiness and fulfillment as an aircraft technician and rescue party leader. Then the government of Margaret Thatcher mounted what seemed to me, and most of the folk in my home region, a concerted and physically brutal attack on the rights of workers and the unemployed: another "limited war" planned by neo-conservatives. When the policy on the European placement of American short-range nuclear missiles provoked a

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further reaction from feminists and environmentalists, and my own girlfriend was caught "manning" the barricades stormed by police, I was sick at heart. It was time to leave. After pressing my case at a military tribunal, I was permitted an honorable discharge as a conscientious objector. Helping to save lives as a military rescuer, I was able to learn the great value of military service in a just cause. Pressed by conscience into an early discharge, I can easily understand the great individual and collective harm done by compulsion.

I differ, then, from Bob Fullinwider, who seems to believe that it is safe for a democracy not to distribute such sacrifice around more equitably, the usual prescription for which is called a draft. It is also clear, although the administration continues to prevaricate on the point, that fresh forces *are* now needed to relieve the strain on the overburdened regular force. Recent announcements from both the UK and the US about adding new forces and further lengthening the tours for both part-time and regular soldiers already in Iraq amply demonstrate the need.

If Britain and the United States must continue to expend both blood *and* treasure in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, it is patently and dangerously unfair that the burden of shedding blood is placed upon middle and lower class youth. Yet Bill Galston's plea for a program of universal national service to lessen the injustice is patently unworkable. Even the eighteenth

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century political philosopher John Stuart Mill, the authority cited by Galston for the "fair share" argument, would be forced to concede that the monumental disutility created by such a scheme might easily outweigh the utility. Disutilities would occur not only in the minds of those drafted. As Fullinwider points out, our military probably would want only a fraction of the new forces, condemning the rest to some domestic service program, a new and ill-formed Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the details of which Galston does not provide. One finds a dilemma: on one horn is a "spectatorial" democracy, in which some merely watch while others serve and die. On the other horn of the dilemma one finds the misuse of the state's powers to coerce all young people into what will clearly become a make-work and vacuous service in homeless shelters, inner-city schools and the military. Since neither extreme is tolerable, there *must* be some middle ground between the horns.

A Failure to Appreciate Harm

Fullinwider concedes that a draft is legitimate if it is necessary for national defense. But he disputes that a draft is needed now. Additionally, he cites that such interference will no doubt reduce the efficiency and effectiveness of the force, at least in part because it will reduce the overall quality and tractability of recruits.

These considerations are the basis for his contention that the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) should be left as is. The personnel recruited must be of good quality; therefore draftees are not welcome. There is no mercenary impulse to worry about, since the people involved know what they are getting into.

But *do* we know what we are getting into? As an unintended consequence of his defense of the *status quo*, Fullinwider belittles the distinct harm that is done when our volunteers come home to their relatives in aluminum coffins or wheelchairs. It must be extremely hard to explain to some of these parents, wives, husbands, and children that their loves died as a consequence of a career choice. To make it more than that, the civic life of a democratic nation still requires, even in the age of globalization, the perpetuation of the civic myth of democratic service. It is even better if it is not actually a myth. We have to respect military and other national service over and above its career components. Service cannot safely be restricted *either* to elites *or* to lower classes or minorities, since to do so aids in the perpetuation of both. As Galston forcefully argues, service must be spread out over society as evenly as possible.

At the same time, however, Galston fails to appreciate the unequal but distinct harm nonetheless that is done when a sovereign person is compelled in any way. Conscription, whether for the military or a wider range of service options, is compulsion. If it is not slavery, then those who are conscripted are likely to act like slaves in the absence of any better argument for their service; they will be stubborn and intractable. The reason why draftees fought so well in the Second World

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War and for the early part of the Cold War—and by comparison so poorly in Vietnam—is because they accepted the reasons given for their service and, by extension, the authority of the state and the leaders who sent them. They were not, in most cases, fully compelled, but instead they were quite willing to serve. Because some in the ranks were compelled and unwilling, the Vietnam war was often indifferently fought. The continued willingness of volunteers in Iraq depends in large part on how well their burdens are distributed, and on how strongly they believe in the mission and its progenitors' sincerity. The Bush administration is beginning to see that willingness erode.

Even a nation that enjoys an enduring and vigorous ethic of universal military service might eventually

regret the use of universal compulsion for other reasons. Germans who resisted compulsion in the same period were likely to find themselves in prison or quickly dead, to the everlasting shame of that state. Willy Brandt, former premier of Germany, would agree. He escaped to Norway during World War II, where he resisted German occupation. Following the defeat of Nazism, he became, of course, a hero. The students of the White Rose Resistance, one of very few German anti-war protests in the Second World War, are rightly heroes to their country today. Their story, too rarely told in the US, demonstrates the extreme nature of the harm from universal compulsion in a time of attenuated conscience.

At that time, many people of conscience—Mennonites, Brethren, Amish, and Quakers—became smokejumpers, farm-workers, firefighters, and medics, trading horse and buggy for pack and Pulaski and other tools. Pacifists performed alternative service to their honor and that of the nation that had, belatedly, realized the civic value of their conscience and organized Alternative Service. If the German *Reich* had included enough such people (if they hadn't evicted them to America several centuries earlier), it is possible that the Holocaust could have been avoided. A similar, although less well-worked out conscience on the part of American youth ended the Vietnam War after My Lai and other disasters brought home the fact that it was the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time. A system of just civic service must therefore honor service *and* conscience while avoiding compulsion.

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A draft is therefore a civic myth: a unicorn. There is no such animal. Democratic service is not achieved by the compulsion of the state, but by the individual consent of those who serve. It will not work to draft youth for a war with which they disagree. They will not fight the war; the war will then be lost. Their disagreement, however, is not something to be hated and despised, as it so often is by conservatives and so-called patriots. It is instead a national treasure of sorts, since it is just that disagreement that can stop a nation that is about to propel itself into an unjust or unnecessary war, as did Nazi Germany in the late 1930s, as did the US in 1963 and 1964. As we might have done just recently.

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solution will not work practically; it encourages stubborn, intractable behavior, and discourages protest. Neither is actually tolerable. For myself, I would like to see President Bush, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary of Defense Wolfowitz, and the rest pulling guard duty in Baghdad. If they were to be killed, I'd give them the same empty ceremony that is provided to the rest of the returning dead. But this is juvenile pique, venting, mere name-calling. It is not a long-term solution, a solution that will outlast the neo-conservatives. And the problem is clearly not "who serves" as much as "who leads."

Between the Horns: Service *and* Education

A route between the horns is mentioned, but not examined fully, by both Galston and Fullinwider. They refer to the system of benefits available for the current volunteer service programs within and without the military. There's a policy that I like! I am a professor at an inexpensive private college that serves students of lower and middle class extraction, and my students

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regularly take part in these programs as a way of broadening their horizons and saving money for college. On any given day, my classes will contain twenty students, of whom one or possibly two will have served an enlistment in the armed services. One may be an active member of the National Guard, and a much larger number are, have been, or will be volunteers for outfits like AmeriCorps, our rural fire department and rescue ambulance, college search and rescue team, or sheriff's department. Recent internships supported by the college have included service as diverse as search and rescue in Yosemite National Park, civic service with non-profit organizations in Washington, DC, or work with our local food bank. Our students serve, and we are proud of them.

At other times in my college teaching career, I have taught at places where the average incomes of parents were a lot higher, and the average esteem for service of any kind much lower. I much prefer my students now. But without the connections that the wealthy enjoy, in a world of "it's not what you know, but who you know," my students will struggle after college, and they know it, and I hate the thought. I can't abolish the other kinds of schools and other kinds of students, the

ones where service is not in the curriculum and where procession through life is assured by connections.

But I want to reduce their effect on society, and increase the effect of students like my own. I need a way, as does Galston, to encourage the civic participation of students from deserving backgrounds, a way to train them, and many more of them, to be the leaders of the kind of society in which I want to live. Fullinwider accuses Galston of “social engineering.” I agree, and say we need more of it, and better targeted. There’s nothing intrinsically wrong with the engineering of incentives. In fact, when I was at the University of Maryland’s School of Public Affairs, more than one of Galston and Fullinwider’s eminent colleagues explained at length on taxing “bads” and subsidizing goods. To not pay attention to such things, it was quite soberly explained, was to run the risk of perverse results. Perverted results are clearly what we have in a society where we throw off political leadership of the present sort. A long-term solution would replace the leadership pool of society with more deserving characters.

To tax the bad of non-service while sponsoring the good of service, one needs a place to grasp the “monetary handles.” That place is college. The route between the horns needs to 1.) achieve Galston’s goal of reorganizing incentives in society to foster service and civic participation, 2.) observe Fullinwider’s standards of non-compulsion and non-interference with the AVF, and 3.) address my own strong preference for a college system that reduces elitism in society and recognizes service to society. The first step is not the revision of the military or even the AmeriCorps program, but of the Federal Student Aid Program.

Service to government and society in general is best repaid by strong government support for education and career building. Both Galston and Fullinwider refer to the increasing need for education in the armed

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forces. Revising student aid in favor of service is one way to provide a stronger link between colleges and the military, a link Galston says is sorely needed. Similar beneficiaries would include the Peace Corps, Americorps/VISTA, inner city and rural schools, hospitals, environmental and social service providers. Instead of reinstituting Selective Service boards all around the country, I advocate elected National Service boards, whose job it would be to distribute financial aid for higher education on the basis of some-

thing like a one-to-one distribution, say one year of service to the greater community earns one year of support for education and training for young people to progress in life. This is a rate deliberately higher (times three or four) than that offered currently through the GI Bill, in effect a reinforcement of that benefit and its yet further extension to nonmilitary service. Prospective students applying for aid would demonstrate that they have participated in service by producing approved documentation such as records of military service or supporting letters from social service agencies. Aid would go for all kinds of college and university work, but also for technical skills training and the like. A revolving door would be instituted in which high school graduates serve to earn their baccalaureates, and then return to service to earn advanced degrees. The accession of graduates to higher posts in civic life, business, and government would create a better understanding of service at that level, and ensure fair and just recruitment practices. Nepotism and favor would be steadily eliminated.

One fully-intended consequence would be to dramatically increase and ease the pathways by which youth from underprivileged backgrounds become leaders in all walks of life and in society in general. There would be no compulsion, since students are not compelled to take federal financial aid. Students from wealthy families where service is disregarded would not be penalized, but would eventually find it harder to do what they are accustomed to doing: secure college places and jobs denied those with merit. Students from wealthy families who serve meaningfully would be at no disadvantage. But for students from rough and difficult backgrounds, the pathway to success would be much clearer. There would be no harm to persons of conscience, since they would find ample outlet in the various forms of service allowed by the boards. There would be no harm to religious minorities, such as Mormons, cited by Galston, whose local boards would presumably adjust to local conditions and, for instance, allow non-religious missionary service in the overseas clinics already run by that church.

Possible Objections

Some will argue that this scheme would fail to fulfill the requirements of equality and universality insisted on by Galston. My response: Conscription was *never* really universal. People are intrinsically unequal in lots of ways. There were always ways out of the draft, for instance, and many of these loopholes contribute greatly to the dishonesty of individuals and society in general. Were those Vietnam-era draft dodgers who went to Canada and who were later pardoned by President Carter equal in conscience to the Peace Church youth who went to prison? Was it equal ser-

vice to be made an army cook at home during the second World War, or to be a fighter pilot? Of course not. One finds intrinsic inequalities among people and their contributions. Requiring equality from life is akin to requiring blood from a stone. Wise people usually settle for justice, best decided by a jury of peers, in this case a national service board. It would be a far more just world if the people who were most likely to die in the next Iraq war were also the people whose expertise and leadership would be sought out after the conflict, if the returning 20 year-old GIs could become 21 year-old college students, and 25 year-old graduates with good job prospects.

Others will argue that the scheme fails to fulfill the requirement of non-interference with the AVF that is recommended by Fullinwider. I doubt that this will be a problem in practice. It might instead increase the quality and quantity of the pool of applicants upon which the military must draw. In a world where the profession of arms becomes increasingly technical,

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linking military service directly to college help would probably be a boon. And, as recent events have taught us, we need more troops.

Finally, it might be argued that my scheme reinforces a possible mercenary quality in today's AVF. I disagree. Galston cites Stephen Hess on the social value of serving at low rank with no sign of a "light at the end of the tunnel." There's a further applicable fact about tunnel vision in today's youth. For most of our youngsters of the instant-gratification era, the reasons they enlist or take volunteer service will almost certainly be good and wholesome; their time horizon is typically too limited for it to be otherwise. The reward of college

support will be known and understood, but as a carrot it will be less attractive compared to the others available: seeing the world, doing adventurous things, making a difference. The stick that drives them, of course, is us: their parents and teachers, from whom they wish to be removed as fast as humanly possible.

Conclusion

To summarize my argument: Galston is entirely correct to state that society risks much by ignoring the issue of justice in service institutionalized in the current AVF. The nightly parade of dead, largely lower- and middle-class faces across our screens is a great and terrible harm and a gross injustice. The burdens need to be shared. Fullinwider also is correct to say that compulsory service can create more harm than good. I contend that we should link service more closely to civil society through far stronger support for education, working at the same time to undercut unearned privilege and create a corps of future civic leaders beyond compare in history. That's what we really need, not a draft.

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Sources: William A. Galston, "A Sketch of Some Arguments for Conscription," and Robert K. Fullinwider, "Conscription—No" appeared in *Philosophy & Public Policy Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 3 (Summer 2003). The Mennonite, Quaker, and Church of the Brethren are those Christian religious persuasions that hold to the "peace testimony" of conscience against all war. Amish are perhaps best seen as fundamentalist Mennonites. The author is an indifferently observant Quaker.