

Cato Institute Policy Analysis No. 214: Draft Registration: The Politics of Institutional Immortality

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Executive Summary

President Jimmy Carter reinstituted draft registration to demonstrate "resolve" after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Today there is no Soviet Union, America's military power is unrivaled, and the all-volunteer force is an undoubted success. Even the Department of Defense acknowledges that registration could be dropped with no effect on military mobilization requirements. Yet draft registration lives on, an example of the difficulty of terminating even the most useless government programs.

President Clinton cites three reasons for retaining registration, all of which lack credibility. His first rationale is that the sign-up constitutes a "relatively low-cost insurance policy." But registration was intended to quickly generate a large conscript army for a protracted war. Today that kind of conflict is a paranoid fantasy. The president's second reason is that ending registration could send the "wrong signal" to potential enemies. But America's military credibility is the result of highly skilled personnel and advanced weaponry, not the existence of a list of potential conscripts. The administration's muddled foreign policy has far more potential to cause adversaries to miscalculate than would the end of draft registration. Finally, Clinton argues that registration can help "maintain the link between the all-volunteer force and society at large." But merely signing a draft card does not instill patriotism.

If the Clinton administration will not acknowledge that draft registration serves no useful purpose, Congress should take the initiative to dismantle the Selective Service System. That action would save taxpayers \$25 million a year.

Introduction

It was 1980 when Jimmy Carter began registering 18-year-old men for a possible draft. The Cold War was raging, NATO confronted a numerically superior Warsaw Pact, the Soviets had invaded Afghanistan, Iran was holding Americans hostage, and U.S. confidence was slipping. Today there is no more Soviet Union, no more superpower duel, and no credible threat of a global conflict. Communism is dead; Washington's democratic capitalist allies dominate key regions around the globe; and America reigns supreme, both economically and militarily. The Pentagon fought the Persian Gulf War with volunteers, foresees no future need for conscripts, and says draft registration is unnecessary. The Selective Service System, it would seem, has become a forlorn anachronism.

However, President Bill Clinton, who worked so hard to avoid service in Vietnam, apparently still lives in 1980.^{[\[1\]](#)} In mid-May he announced his opposition to congressional proposals to end the draft sign-up. Registration is, he

explained to the Speaker of the House, "essential to our national security."^[2] And so the federal government continues to gather names for an outdated list in order to acquire surplus soldiers for a fanciful conflict.

The Origins of Registration

When Congress initiated conscription for World Wars I and II, it simply registered young men en masse. With the reinstitution of a peacetime draft after World War II, the Selective Service established an ongoing registration program, a practice continued despite the inauguration of the All-Volunteer Force in 1973. Two years later, however, President Gerald Ford suspended registration and the Selective Service was placed in "deep standby" status. Concern about the quality of the AVF led to proposals for renewed registration and conscription; while Congress rejected those proposals, it did begin to expand the Selective Service, and the Carter administration developed a plan for postmobilization registration. Then came the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which led President Carter to propose the registration of both men and women. After rancorous debate, Congress approved funding to sign up 18-year-old men.

Carter administration officials contended that registration was "a necessary step to preserving or enhancing our national security requirements."^[3] Unfortunately for those officials, one week before the president's announcement, the Selective Service itself had prepared a report endorsing postmobilization registration as "preferable" to a peacetime system.^[4] Scrambling to find an alternative rationale, Office of Management and Budget deputy director John White contended that the president really was "indicating to the world our resolve."^[5] Alas, there is little evidence that the Soviets, let alone anyone else, noticed.

During the 1980 presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan, a long-time opponent of conscription, denounced registration for doing "little to enhance our military preparedness." He argued that conscription actually decreased military preparedness "by making people think we have solved our defense problems" and by destroying "the very values that our society is committed to defending."^[6] Once elected, however, Reagan faced strong Pentagon and Selective Service pressure to preserve the sign-up. The issue also reached him for decision at an unfortunate time: shortly after Poland's Soviet-induced crackdown on the labor union Solidarity. Those circumstances caused Reagan to place exaggerated importance on the program's alleged symbolic value. He officially based his decision to retain registration on its alleged efficacy in procuring emergency manpower, but his arguments, like Carter's, were immediately undercut by the facts, in this case the findings of his own Military Manpower Task Force that peacetime registration would save little time during war and that other alternatives were available.^[7] So the administration was reduced to contending that the United States would appear weak if it dropped the program after Warsaw's actions.

Once in place, registration proved permanent. The Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan; Polish voters rebuffed the Communist party; the Berlin Wall fell; Solidarity's Lech Walesa became president of Poland; the USSR collapsed; and the Warsaw Pact disbanded, with its former members seeking to join NATO. Still the draft sign-up continued. Last year the House voted to end both the Selective Service and registration, but the Senate balked and the agency survived. In December the Department of Defense issued a report acknowledging that the program could be dropped with "no effect on military mobilization requirements, little effect on the time it would take to mobilize and no measurable effect on military recruitment."^[8] As a result, stated the DOD, "suspending peacetime registration could be accomplished with limited risk to national security considering the low probability of the need for conscription."^[9] At last the case was closed, or so it seemed.

But on May 18 President Clinton announced that he intended to keep registration. The likeliest explanation is that Clinton, like Presidents Carter and Reagan before him, was attracted by the sign-up's perceived symbolic value. But in the post-Cold War era, it was not clear who was supposed to be impressed by that symbol of U.S. resolve. There is no longer a Soviet Union to awe, and the United States is on reasonably good terms with all of the other major powers in the global community. Although there remain some malcontents and potential malefactors on the international scene, they are not large or strong enough to constitute more than regional threats. Moreover, if they are not intimidated by America's existing military might, it is not clear how continuing draft registration would make a difference.

It is more likely that President Clinton saw registration as a means of burnishing his own reputation as commander in chief. His problems with the military establishment have received extensive media attention; he is widely disliked by

officers and enlisted personnel alike. Equally important, his muddled foreign policy worries Americans across the political spectrum.^[10] Keeping registration appeared, however superficially, to be a "pro-military" decision that might dampen the rising criticism.

That Clinton's motives reflect such political concerns seems probable, since none of his three official reasons for keeping registration is believable--or, indeed, even makes sense. The reasons he cited were security insurance, the desire to send an international signal, and the promotion of better civilian-military relations.

Fraudulent Security Insurance

According to the president, "Maintaining the SSS [Selective Service System] and draft registration provide [sic] a hedge against unforeseen threats and is a relatively low-cost 'insurance policy' against our underestimating the maximum level of threat we expect our Armed Forces to face."^[11] Acting Selective Service director G. Huntington Banister has similarly argued that funding his agency "equates to paying a reasonable insurance premium to provide our Nation with a hedge against the unknown."^[12]

The notion of security insurance sounds superficially appealing, but in the case of registration we should ask, Insurance against what? Virginians have little need of earthquake insurance; farmers who till Nebraska's cornfields need not purchase hurricane insurance. America, the world's sole remaining superpower with by far the most powerful and technologically sophisticated military, does not need draft registration.

The sign-up was always intended to quickly generate a large conscript army--similar to America's 13-million-man military in World War II--for a protracted conventional war against the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact centered in Europe. Today that kind of conflict is a paranoid fantasy. Consequently, the premium for registration "insurance" would be better spent elsewhere.

Lack of a Major Threat

In the last decade, both sides of the military equation have changed. The global hegemonic threat, the Soviet Union, is gone, replaced by a much weaker Russia, with a decaying military and an imploding economy. At the same time, America's populous and prosperous allies have spurred ahead, joined by the Central and Eastern European states, which are more closely aligned with Washington than with Moscow. Last year NATO outspent Russia by 15 to 1; in the coming year Britain, France, and Germany will each spend more than Moscow on the military, as Russia's military budget shrinks to as little as \$20 billion.^[13] It is hard to concoct even the most implausible military scenario that would require the instantaneous creation of a huge conscript army. Acknowledges the Pentagon in its report on registration:

With reduced force levels combined with two decades of successful experience with raising and maintaining a volunteer force, improved Total Force policy, recent victorious wartime experiences, and the quality of active and reserve personnel, it is highly unlikely that we will have to reinstate the draft in the foreseeable future. Consequently, peacetime draft registration could be suspended without irreparable damage to national security.^[14]

As Gen. Colin Powell, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, acknowledged, he was "running out of villains. I'm down to Castro and Kim Il Sung."^[15] The lack of a serious threat to America's security is reflected in the Pentagon's own planning. Two years ago the DOD considered seven hypothetical conflicts, ranging from the inconsequential (coups d'etat in Panama and the Philippines); to the modest and therefore remediable without a draft, such as another Iraqi invasion; to the long-term, which would require no immediate military action, such as an emergent or reemergent superpower. Only one, a Russian invasion of Lithuania, even vaguely resembled a situation in which registration might matter.^[16] It is unlikely, however, that the United States would actually wage war with Russia over such meager stakes. Admitted the Pentagon last year, "Absent a reemerging global threat, plans for likely contingencies do not envision a draft."^[17]

Role of the Reserves

The world remains full of civil and ethnic wars--in Armenia, Georgia, Liberia, Rwanda, Somalia, Tajikistan, and the former Yugoslavia, to name just a few. But the United States is unlikely to enter most of them, let alone to need to conscript men, and possibly women, to carry out massive, long-term military operations. If a regional conflict, like the gulf war, arguably impinged more directly on American interests, it could be handled by existing forces, both active and reserve, which today approach 4 million personnel.

Indeed, the DOD currently possesses a total "manpower mobilization pool" of 5.1 million.^[18] Better, more creative use of reserve forces would allow the United States to sharply cut military outlays while maintaining a significant surge capacity in the event of an unexpected emergency. The quickest means of generating additional combat troops is through a well-trained reserve. Opined the Congressional Research Service:

A requirement for major increases in combat forces could be met much more quickly by activating more reserves than by instituting a draft. A draft would not provide the trained officers and non-commissioned officers to man effective units; it would only turn out freshly trained junior enlisted recruits.^[19]

The Pentagon itself made a similar point in its report on registration: "Because of the reduced global threat together with improved total force readiness and the Department's proven ability to maintain a quality volunteer force, the effects of eliminating draft registration on our ability to meet mobilization requirements and on recruiting are expected to be minimal."^[20]

And even as force levels shrink in coming years, the United States will remain the world's predominant military power. Admits the DOD, "Because likely [war] scenarios are on a regional scale and the Total Force can be expected to meet even near-simultaneous commitments, the need for that safety net on short notice is reduced."^[21]

The Nuclear War Bogeyman

The only other argument of consequence, it would appear, is that even small-scale future conflicts could prove to be unexpectedly bloody. Bush administration Selective Service director Robert Gambino, temporarily kept on by President Clinton, argued last year that "perhaps the world is safer today, but then again, more nations have, or are acquiring, nuclear capability."^[22] Gambino went on to cite President Clinton's comment that the United States must "be prepared to lead a world challenged by ethnic conflict, [and] by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction."^[23] Retired Gen. Maxwell Thurman contends that "weapons of advanced technology and mass destruction are available to third-, fourth- and even fifth-rate armies. . . . A functioning Selective Service is an important backstop should our forces suffer unexpected casualties in a future conflict. The ability to rapidly call young men to duty for training could, indeed, deter wrong-headed despots from using weapons of mass destruction against our forces."^[24]

Yet it is Gambino's and Thurman's argument that is wrong-headed, and in almost every way. What foreign ethnic or mundane territorial conflict is worth embroiling America in a nuclear confrontation? Surely the United States should be more cautious about intervening if a war could go nuclear, especially when the stakes are not likely to be vital to America. Angola, Armenia, Bosnia, Georgia, Haiti, Liberia, Rwanda, Somalia--which of those imbroglios warrants risking nuclear war?

The prospect of nuclear proliferation is increasingly worrisome, but as yet the danger that the United States might confront a nuclear-armed rogue state is purely hypothetical. The time may come when America will have to face such a threat, but if it does, America's decision about whether to attack is not likely to be influenced by the existence of draft registration.

Moreover, if another nation used weapons of mass destruction against U.S. forces, surely America's response would be overwhelmingly in kind, not to send in more infantrymen to be slaughtered by additional enemy nuclear strikes. (One hardly need ask which strategy would have the greater deterrent effect on a potentially aggressive Third World dictator.) The argument that plentiful manpower can defeat a nuclear strike was bizarre enough when used by the

Chinese during the 1960s; it is nonsensical for America to embrace that argument in the 1990s.

Registration Is Militarily Valueless

Even if generating an immediate supply of plentiful manpower mattered, the draft sign-up is an expensive irrelevancy. Draftees have to be trained as well as conscripted, meaning that it would be five to six months before any significant number reached the battlefield. Thus registration, to the extent that it would do anything, would only advance by a couple of weeks the production of a few extra soldiers months after the United States would have gone to war. As a result, the program would be useless in the smaller conflicts we are likely to see in the future. For instance, the war with Iraq would have ended before any significant number of conscripts would have made it to the battlefield had President Bush restarted the draft when he first sent troops to Kuwait.

Registration is not necessary, even to preserve the option of conscription. All registration does is advance inductions, making soldiers available slightly more quickly months down the line after they finish basic and specialized-skill training. But the actual time saved is minimal and of no practical value.

The Selective Service says that it could now deliver the first draftee within 13 days after mobilization, while it would take weeks more without advance registration. (The agency's claimed "savings" from the peacetime sign-up grew suspiciously after President Reagan decided to preserve the program, increasing from seven to eight weeks, and then to "months.")^[25] For years the Selective Service claimed that the first inductee would not be available until M + 69 days without peacetime registration, or 56 days later than with the sign-up. Then last year the agency informed the Pentagon that it could deliver the first inductee by M + 43 days.^[26]

The agency's objectivity about the effectiveness of a postmobilization system is in doubt, since without peacetime registration, the Selective Service would largely cease to exist. In short, the Selective Service has a very powerful incentive to demonstrate a need for ongoing registration. Consider the fact that in 1940, before computers and 54 years of other technological advances, the government acquired the first conscript at M + 63 days--nearly a week sooner than the Selective Service said it would take when the agency convinced President Reagan to retain the program. In 1917 the government took only M + 73, just four days longer, to induct the first person.^[27] The agency's current estimates possess little more credibility.

In fact, Carter administration officials developed a postmobilization plan--shelved with no little embarrassment after the president switched course--to deliver the first inductee within 17 days. Only slightly more pessimistic were the Congressional Budget Office in 1978 and the Selective Service System in 1979, which both figured that a postmobilization sign-up would yield the first draftee within a month.^[28] Similarly, President Reagan's Military Manpower Task Force concluded that it would take about a month to begin conscripting young men without peacetime registration.^[29] And that estimate came in 1982, before a decade's worth of dramatic technological change. Yet the Selective Service still says that without advance registration, the first inductee would not arrive until M + 43 days.

Equally important is the fact that at the start of any war the training camps would be overwhelmed with new recruits awaiting training, reservists needing retraining, members of the Delayed Entry Program who had signed up to enter the service at a later date but could be inducted immediately in an emergency, and volunteers.^[30] The first three categories alone would generate a minimum of 40,000 new soldiers within a month.^[31] Even more volunteers are likely. American experience during World Wars I and II demonstrates that any crisis serious enough to warrant consideration of conscription would most likely bring forth a flood of volunteers. As a result, there would be no room for draftees for one or two months, or even longer, at which point a postmobilization registration system would be delivering an equal stream of conscripts.

The DOD itself acknowledges that peacetime registration is essentially irrelevant to its needs, even for a large-scale and lengthy conventional conflict. Observed the Pentagon:

While conscription is required to support an extended, large-scale conventional war, it would take months to expand the training base and accelerate equipment production rates to use the conscripts effectively.

The Services would not be able to absorb a flood of inductees pumped into the training base. Moreover, with over one million trained members in Selected Reserve units, plus another 750,000 Individual Ready Reserve personnel, the capability already exists to augment the active forces substantially through the early days of a major conflict. By contrast, during the Korean Conflict it took over a year to expand the force by 1.8 million. [\[32\]](#)

One final factor favors registration as part of mobilization: list accuracy. Although the Selective Service does an effective job of making 18-year-olds register, it is far less successful in getting registrants to send in change-of-address forms. As a result, Selective Service lists of men in what is, perhaps, the most mobile age group, one-fifth of whom move annually, deteriorate rapidly. With only 15 percent of registrants sending in change-of-address forms, a General Accounting Office survey in the 1980s concluded that "address information for between one-fifth and two-fifths of the registrants in the prime induction group . . . could be outdated." [\[33\]](#)

The agency has since attempted to improve its procedures, including incorporating address changes filed with the U.S. Postal Service. But a recent study still found only a 70 percent accuracy rate. [\[34\]](#) Moreover, the Selective Service admits to problems even with letters sent as part of its enforcement program before most young men have gone off to school and moved several times. Explained Acting Director G. Huntington Banister to Congress, "An analysis found that the percentage of mail returned as undeliverable on the initial and second compliance letters did not justify a second mailing to the undeliverable addresses and they were discontinued also." [\[35\]](#) In short, the agency cannot overcome a basic problem: the Selective Service will find it difficult or impossible to locate some potential draftees, especially within the short time frame that is supposed to be so critical. Acknowledged President Reagan's Military Manpower Task Force, "We don't know how complete peacetime or post-mobilization lists will be at the time inductions are to begin." [\[36\]](#) The Selective Service has encountered other problems as well. Incredibly, during its recent mobilization effort, MOBEX 93, the agency found that it could download only 54 percent of its files. [\[37\]](#) All in all, that can hardly make one feel sanguine about the value of the "insurance" being purchased through registration.

Wrong Signals

President Clinton explained that his second reason for not ending registration was that "terminating the SSS and draft registration now could send the wrong signal to our potential enemies who are watching for signs of U.S. resolve." [\[38\]](#) That argument is not new. Presidents Carter and Reagan both contended that registration would demonstrate toughness to the Soviets. Gen. David Jones, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, termed registration a "visible sign of commitment--to allies, friends, potential enemies" and a "clear manifestation of U.S. will." [\[39\]](#) As overwrought as those arguments were then, in 1980 there was at least an adversarial power against whom a demonstration of resolve had some value, especially after the disastrous Carter years. Yet even then the draft sign-up was not a serious symbolic weapon. Observed Reagan, before he flip-flopped on the issue, "The Soviets can tell the difference between computer lists of inexperienced young men and new weapons systems, a million-man reserve, and an experienced army." [\[40\]](#)

Today the "resolve" argument is far sillier. Who are the enemies to be cowed by continuing registration? Does President Clinton really believe that Haiti's General Cedras will change his mind about ceding power or that North Korea's Kim Jong Il will accelerate his country's nuclear weapons program if Washington stops signing up 18-year-olds? That Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic might launch a war of conquest against Macedonia if he learns that the Selective Service System is being abandoned? Or that Boris Yeltsin might order the seizure of Latvia, Poland, or even Alaska, to pacify opposition nationalists, if the United States dropped registration? Just whom is President Clinton hoping to impress by the continuance of registration?

America already stands alone as the globe's preeminent military power. It possesses the most highly skilled, well-trained personnel and advanced, high-tech weaponry of any country. The United States spends far more on the military than any other nation on earth, 10 times what Russia spends, 13 times what China spends, and nearly twice as much as Britain, France, Germany, and Japan combined spend. [\[41\]](#) The U.S. Navy roams the globe while that of Russia rusts in port. The United States maintains bases throughout Asia, Europe, and the Middle East; the Red Army has fled home, and no other nation possesses a similar forward presence. Any foreign leader not aware of those facts will not likely be

awed by the Selective Service's outdated list of 18- to 25-year-olds. What will continue to deter potential adversaries is maintaining the readiness of the armed services, to prevent the creation of a "hollow" military, and devoting serious attention to reserve forces, to allow quick expansion in an emergency.

If the United States--or more accurately, the Clinton foreign policy team--has a credibility problem, draft registration is not a solution. Preserving the registration system will not restore the tattered credibility of a president who promiscuously threatens military intervention in conflicts that are irrelevant to American interests, only to back down when political realities intrude. In cases such as Bosnia, Haiti, and Somalia, administration blustering, followed by humiliating retreats, has done more than anything else to strain U.S. credibility. If the president and his chief foreign policy advisers would simply articulate a clear, consistent security policy based on prudent and realistic concepts of national interest, potential adversaries would have little occasion to question U.S. resolve.

Civilian-Military Relations

Citing a third reason for continuing registration, President Clinton argued:

As fewer and fewer members of our society have direct military experience, it is increasingly important to maintain the link between the All-Volunteer Force and our society at large. The Armed Forces must also know that the general population stands behind them, committed to serve, should the preservation of our national security so require.^[42]

What is most striking about that argument is that it comes from a president who worked extraordinarily hard to avoid military service. The fact that Bill Clinton has no direct military experience is, of course, a result of his own calculated efforts. To now force young men to sign up for the draft in order to expand their contact with the military seems a bit hypocritical, to say the least.

Still, the president's concern is valid: politicians who understand the reality of military service are probably less likely to squander citizens' lives in senseless adventurism.^[43] Indeed, the Pentagon has proved to be most reluctant to enter into such murky conflicts as those in Somalia and Bosnia. It was Defense secretary Caspar Weinberger, representing the Pentagon's view, who took the more cautious position during his very public debate with Secretary of State George Shultz in 1984 over the use of military force.

Alas, registration does nothing to "maintain the link between the All-Volunteer Force and our society at large." Selective Service spokesman Lewis Brodsky argues that the draft sign-up "is virtually the only thing left that the typical American man has to do that's associated with military service."^[44] Signing a card when turning 18 does not make one a patriot, however, or give one any sense of the rigors of wartime service.^[45] Nor does registration indicate that "the general population stands behind" the armed forces, as claimed by the president--after all, Bill Clinton had registered before he went off to Oxford University. That obviously did not mean that he stood behind the military. In a conflict that is seen as essential to the security of America, volunteers will flood forth; in one that people perceive to be unnecessary, meaningless, and immoral, like Vietnam, registration and conscription will generate social division and hatred of the military.

The president would achieve much more by reaffirming the worth of the military as a vocation and encouraging young people to serve--in the words of Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.), "making military service an honor and patriotic symbol of service rather than having the uniform as a symbol of servitude, which is what accompanies a draft and conscription."^[46] Last, if the president is serious about enhancing the value of military service, he should promise to risk the lives of military personnel only where vital U.S. interests are at stake, not for such quixotic causes as trying to bring peace to the Balkans and democracy to Haiti.

A related contention advanced by General Thurman is that "registration is grounded in full citizenship" and represents "a larger responsibility to serve the republic."^[47] Most citizens are not, however, obligated to sign up; only 18-year-old males have that "larger responsibility." And most of the roughly 1.5 million males who register annually would not be drafted, even in a military crisis. In short, registration has little to do with citizenship or making "young people . . .

feel close to their Government," in the curious words of Rep. Barbara Kennelly (D-Conn.).^[48]

Moreover, the highest form of service is rendered by those who serve voluntarily, not those who are forced, under pain of fine and imprisonment, to fill out a Selective Service card at their local post office. That a general who once headed the army's recruiting program views registration as the fulfillment of Americans' citizenship responsibilities shows the corruption of the understanding of service. There is no higher calling than voluntarily defending one's family, neighborhood, and community. Signing up for an outdated list to serve as cannon fodder in an unnecessary war is another matter entirely.

Noncoercive Alternatives

Even if registration had some value, there would still be a better alternative, one that would fulfill the president's three stated objectives for peacetime registration. For instance, the administration could create a registration analogue of the All-Volunteer Force--a reserve pool of untrained volunteers ready to accept immediate call-up in the event of a national emergency and mobilization.

How would we create such a Reserve Volunteer Force (RVF)?^[49] The Pentagon could sign up, say, 100,000 or 150,000 young men (perhaps women too, though they are not presently registered or drafted). They could be required to report to the DOD within two weeks, the M + 13 days within which the Selective Service currently promises to deliver the first inductee. Members could be paid a nominal sum, perhaps \$100 annually, involved in the military "family" through participation in events organized by the active and reserve forces, as well as armed services associations, and praised by the president.

Such a system would provide better security benefits than peacetime registration, since it would yield a current list of people ready to serve, not an outdated roster of forced participants. The RVF's size could be adjusted depending on the safety margin desired. A successful voluntary registration would demonstrate genuine patriotic resolve to America's adversaries, whoever they might be. Moreover, involving tens of thousands of young people in military activities through an RVF would enhance civilianmilitary relations and probably help promote recruiting, too. Most important, a voluntary program would be consistent with America's philosophical heritage, which was reflected in the creation of the AVF. In any time other than "the most severe national emergency," stated Ronald Reagan in 1980, "a draft or registration destroys the very values that our society is committed to defending."^[50] An RVF would demonstrate to the world just how important those principles are to tens of thousands of young Americans.

Conclusion

Registration had little enough security value 14 years ago when it was reimposed; it has none today. Registration arguably had some symbolic worth in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, but that justification disappeared years ago. Today conservatives as well as liberals should recognize the difference between inaccurate lists of untrained 18-year-olds and real defense measures.

At a time when the watchword in Washington is reinventing government, the Clinton administration should drop registration and dismantle the Selective Service Administration. What better place is there to start cutting government waste and the deficit than that relic of the Cold War, which currently costs \$25 million a year? Indeed, if Bill Clinton's rationale for retaining registration is to be believed, it is hard to imagine the circumstances under which the United States could abandon the program--the world will, after all, always be dangerous and uncertain. But that supposed insurance has no serious military value. Even the DOD, which rarely finds a military program that it does not support, admits that "registration could be suspended with no effect on military mobilization requirements, little effect on the time it would take to mobilize, and no measurable effect on military recruitment."^[51] Rather, the president seems to have fastened on the issue as a cheap means of burnishing his image both at home and abroad. But it will not help to redress a private record of extravagant hypocrisy and a public record of incompetence and inconsistency. The flaws simply run too deep to be camouflaged by continuing to force young men to sign up for the draft.

If the president will not do what is right, Congress should take the lead. Although in May the House rejected a proposal by Rep. Ron Dellums (D-Calif.) to cut funding for the Selective Service, legislators can still vote to end the

program at any time. And act they should, for peacetime draft registration is an embarrassing example of how difficult it is to end a government program, however irrelevant it has become. More important, the sign-up remains glaringly inconsistent with our commitment to raise America's armed forces in a manner consonant with the fundamental freedoms that underlay the founding of our nation and that the military is tasked to defend.

Notes

[1] There was nothing wrong with avoiding forced participation in a war of dubious moral validity and strategic value, but the president's dissembling attempt to cloak his decision in moral terms while maintaining his "political viability" warrants criticism. See, for example, Doug Bandow, "Will Draft Issue Dog the Campaign?" Washington Times, February 20, 1992, p. G4.

[2] Letter from Bill Clinton to Thomas S. Foley, May 18, 1994, p. 1. Copy in author's files.

[3] "Joint statement by John White, Deputy Director of the Office of Management and Budget, Bernard Rostker, Director of the Selective Service System, and Richard Danzig, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, regarding Department of Defense (DoD) authorization for appropriations for FY 1981," in Hearings on S. 2294 before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, 96th Cong., 2d sess., 1980, p. 1805.

[4] For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Doug Bandow, "Draft Registration: It's Time to Repeal Carter's Final Legacy," Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 86, May 7, 1987, p. 3.

[5] Quoted in George Wilson, "Selective Service Told Carter Registration Is Unnecessary," Washington Post, February 23, 1980, p. A1.

[6] Letter from Ronald Reagan to Sen. Mark O. Hatfield, May 5, 1980. Copy in author's files.

[7] Military Manpower Task Force, "A Report to the President on Selective Service Registration," December 15, 1981.

[8] Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Report to the President and Congress: A Review of the Continued Requirement for Draft Registration," December 1993, p. 12.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Let us count the failures: turning a humanitarian mission into a warlord-hunting, nation-building fiasco in Somalia; retaining and then discarding the Bush administration's policy of forcibly repatriating Haitians, while sending and withdrawing U.S. forces, supporting a tighter embargo, and threatening invasion; criticizing and then adopting Bush's policy toward China; demanding action in Bosnia, only to promote inaction and then undertake half-hearted military strikes before retreating once again; promoting the United Nations as if it had a serious role in world affairs; reviving the long-discredited Law of the Sea Treaty; and refusing to make the sort of serious cuts in post-Cold War military spending once demanded by Democratic presidential candidates during the Cold War.

[11] Letter from Clinton to Foley, p. 1.

[12] Statement of G. Huntington Banister before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee, May 19, 1994, typescript, p. 8.

[13] Fred Hiatt, "Yeltsin Pushes Cuts in Military Spending, Washington Post, June 11, 1994, p. A15. On current French, German, and British military expenditures, see International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance, 1993-1994 (London: Brassey's, 1993), pp. 41, 45, 62. Although Russia could theoretically probably raise a sizable army of ill-paid conscripts for \$20 billion, it could not adequately equip those forces. And as Iraq's performance in the gulf war confirmed, a large army of poorly equipped troops merely provides target practice for a capable opponent.

- [14] Office of the Secretary of Defense, p. iii.
- [15] Quoted in Jim Wolfe, "Powell Sees Opportunity for U.S. to Reduce Military Strength," Defense News, April 8, 1991, p. 12.
- [16] Barton Gellman, "Pentagon War Scenario Spotlights Russia," Washington Post, February 20, 1992, pp. A1, A21.
- [17] Office of the Secretary of Defense, p. 10.
- [18] The Pentagon can also call up retirees and extend the terms of present service personnel. Ibid., p. 7.
- [19] Quoted in Colman McCarthy, "Taps for Selective Service," Washington Post, September 7, 1993, p. E7.
- [20] Office of the Secretary of Defense, pp. 1-2.
- [21] Ibid., p. 9.
- [22] Statement of Robert W. Gambino, director, Selective Service System, before the House Appropriations Subcommittee for Veterans Affairs, Housing and Urban Development, and Independent Agencies, March 31, 1993, p. 1.
- [23] Ibid.
- [24] Maxwell Thurman, "Save Selective Service," Washington Post, August 31, 1993, p. A19.
- [25] Bandow, "Draft Registration," p. 3.
- [26] Office of the Secretary of Defense, p. 9.
- [27] For a more detailed analysis of induction timetables, see Bandow, "Draft Registration," pp. 15-19.
- [28] See Testimony of Barry Lynn, president of Draft Action, in Reinstitution of Procedures for Registration under the Military Selective Service Act, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Manpower and Personnel of the Senate Armed Services Committee, 96th Cong., 1st sess., 1980, pp. 93-94.
- [29] Military Manpower Task Force, pp. 2-4.
- [30] For a discussion of the military's training base capacity, see Bandow, "Draft Registration," pp. 8-10.
- [31] Ibid., pp. 10-14.
- [32] Office of the Secretary of Defense, p. 12.
- [33] General Accounting Office, "Failure of Registrants to Report Address Changes Would Diminish Fairness of Induction Processing," FPCD-82-45, September 24, 1982, p. 1.
- [34] Testimony of Rev. L. William Yolton before the House Appropriations Subcommittee for Veterans Affairs, Housing and Urban Development and Independent Agencies, May 3, 1994, p. 3.
- [35] Statement of G. Huntington Banister, p. 5.
- [36] Military Manpower Task Force, p. 6.
- [37] Testimony of L. William Yolton, p. 3.
- [38] Letter from Clinton to Foley, p. 1.

[39] "Case for Peacetime Registration," Memorandum from Joint Chiefs of Staff to chairman, Interagency Working Group, Military Manpower Task Force, December 4, 1981, p. 2.

[40] Letter from Reagan to Hatfield.

[41] International Institute for Strategic Studies, pp. 19, 41, 45, 62, 98, 152.

[42] Letter from Clinton to Foley, p. 1.

[43] Probably, but not certainly. After all, Adolf Hitler, the initiator of the globe's worst conflict, had served in his nation's military during wartime. In contrast, the great "appeaser," Neville Chamberlain, never served in the armed services.

[44] Quoted in Grant Willis, "Clinton to End Registration of 18-Year-Olds for Draft," Air Force Times, June 7, 1993, p. 6.

[45] The Pentagon has suggested that "the entire male target population contemplates the significance of military service when filling out the registration form or viewing public service announcements about the registration requirement." Office of the Secretary of Defense, p. 11. In reality, many recruits have no concept of the true meaning of military service, let alone registrants, who simply fill in a card with their address.

[46] Quoted in McCarthy.

[47] Thurman.

[48] Quoted in National Interreligious Service Board for Conscientious Objectors, "Dellums Loses on House Floor as Clinton Intervenes to Save Draft Registration," Press release, May 24, 1994, p. 2.

[49] For a more detailed discussion, see Bandow, "Draft Registration," pp. 19-23.

[50] Letter from Reagan to Hatfield.

[51] Office of the Secretary of Defense, p. 12.