

The All-Volunteer Force Forum

National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service Universal Service Hearings | February 21, 2019

**Submitted by Major General (Ret.) Dennis Laich, Co-Founder and
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To: National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service
Subject: Response to Staff Memorandum: Universal Service

We recognize the importance and complexity of the issues the Commission is charged to address. Furthermore, we encourage and support universal access and universal expectation as outlined in the Staff Memorandum. However, we maintain that universal obligation, as outlined in the Staff Memorandum, is unsustainable, inefficient, and unfair.

While public service of any type is commendable, all the methods of fulfilling that service are not equal in terms of risk and personal sacrifice. Military service is the only method that requires an individual to write a blank check to the American people potentially payable with his or her life or limb and to surrender individual liberties, such as freedom of speech and where to reside. In the interest of national security, it is important that the Commission be mindful of this critical distinction between military service (either voluntary or conscripted) and other forms of national or public service.

Universal service is unsustainable because its universal/mandatory construct requires a substantial fiscal commitment by placing millions of Americans on the Federal government payroll. The United States is already \$22 trillion in debt with more annual budget deficits projected over the next ten years. The Congressional Budget Office projects that by 2028 the national debt will rise to \$25-28 trillion with annual interest payments approaching one trillion dollars per year. At the same time, obligations for Social Security and Medicare payments will continue to rise as our population ages. The United States may be able to ignore the aggregate national debt but annual interest on that debt must be paid or the nation defaults with untold ramifications.

Universal obligation is inefficient because no bureaucracy or agency currently exists to organize and manage such a program. Large scale government programs such as this require enabling legislation, structure, rules, an adjudication process, and funding and would meet resistance from “small government” advocates in Congress. A fundamental question that must be resolved is who would decide, and by what criteria, who would go to Teach for America and who would go to the Infantry. That a nation divided and distracted as America currently is could agree on an answer to this question is a triumph of hope over pragmatism.

Universal Obligation as defined in the Staff Memorandum is unfair. The Staff Memorandum defines Universal Obligation as “Requiring all Americans to serve....” But ten lines later in that document is this “all 18-20 year olds to commit 12 months of full time service to the nation” or

“one alternative would be that all Americans fulfill a requirement of 600 hours of service before the age of 30”. These age parameters are fundamentally inconsistent with the reference to “all Americans”. This intergenerational bias may be objected to by young Americans who may see themselves as being singled out for obligatory civics training mandated by older generations. Indeed, a powerful argument could be made that older Americans are as much in need of such training as any young person. Older generations unilaterally judging younger generations and ignoring their own failures (national debt, political gridlock, low voter participation, the opioid crisis, high school dropouts, obesity, etc.) seldom has led to progress, cooperation, and mutual respect. The composition of the Commission reflects this potential for tension as none of the Commissioners is younger than 30.

Finally, we note our concern with the process by which public comment is allowed at each hearing. We agree with the two-minute time limit. However, the selection by the Commission to allow comments via a random draw of tickets is inconsistent with the Commission’s stated intent to accommodate as many public comments as possible and may adversely impact the quality, substance, and credibility of the public comments. A first-come, first served process and entertainment of that process for as long a period as necessary, might be as or more productive and would not generate the skepticism associated with such a prearranged fixed process as that stated.

Respectfully submitted,
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