

Statement for the Record – National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service

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My thanks to the Commissioners and staff for the privilege of sharing some thoughts on national service. I'm sorry I can't be there in person to thank you for your commitment to advancing the important means of greater civic engagement and personal growth for young Americans.

I strongly oppose reinstating compulsory service, philosophically and practically. I do not believe the United States government should have the power to compel service absent an urgent national emergency, and no such emergency exists.

Universal conscription would produce an annual cohort of over 209 million. That's nearly twice the size of the active duty military. If conscription were to be adopted, a vast network of employments would be required: the Peace Corps, a civilian conservation corps, perhaps road repair crews, ambulance drivers, service providers to the homeless, supporting religious charities. Moves in those directions would face considerable resistance from unions and other sectors, but they would have important civic value and serve as useful apprenticeships for the draftees.

As a practical matter, forcing free women and men to work for the state imports into the organizations that take the conscripted no small number of people resentful of being compelled, which impedes the ability of the organization to carry out its mission, squanders training resources and leadership attention, and diminishes the morale of the organization.

Even the current volunteer force experiences some discipline problems and desertions. From 2003 to 2005, more than 8,000 women and men deserted from the U.S. military. As U.S. Army spokeswoman MAJ Elizabeth Robbins said, "People always desert, and most do it because they don't adapt well to the military."¹ But that is one fifteenth the proportion of people in military service that deserted during an average year during the Vietnam war, and that provides a pretty good indicator of the difference allowing people to choose to serve makes.

Moreover, unless conscription is flat out universal, it is inherently unfair. Whomsoever is allowed not to serve is receiving a benefit from the government prejudicial to all those who do serve.

I support maintaining the Selective Service System. We may not need it now, but it would be extraordinarily difficult to create in a national emergency that required calling up for service a

¹ Bill Nichols, "8,000 Desert During Iraq War," *USA Today*, 3/7/2006
https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/washington/2006-03-07-deserters_x.htm.

large force. Sustaining the system seems a minimal intrusion, perhaps even a welcome reminder of civic responsibility for the young women and men when they register.

I strongly advocate registering all Americans, regardless of gender. As women have been permitted into combat roles, there is no rationale for excluding them from selective service registration and conscription, should that extreme step prove necessary to the country's welfare. It's insulting to suggest America's mothers and wives and daughters couldn't contribute, whether the need were rebuilding levees after a natural disaster or repelling an invasion from our shores.

Nor is it fair to allow women a broader range of choice for their compulsory service than their male counterparts. America's daughters should be slotted into service as their physical and emotional suitability proves capable of, just like America's sons.

The best way to encourage national service is to incentivize it, as we do with military service. Reward people with specialized skills for choosing service over more lucrative options with signifiers of stature. The Swiss set lower lifetime tax rates for people who do national military service; those who elect not to pay a higher rate the entire rest of their lives.

Brett McGurk and I have advocated a GI Bill for diplomats that would have the government repay student loans in return for voluntary service as an American diplomat.² It would completely cover student loans in return for five years of service, establish a civilian equivalent to the Reserve Officer Training Program with scholarships for students who study languages and commit to serve overseas in the Foreign Service, and fund graduate study for those already in diplomatic service provided they commit to extended tours.

Our proposal for diplomats is just one example of the level of effort required, but also the advantages to our government and civic life, that voluntary programs of national service will provide.

Specific to military service, I would suggest a couple of activities that might further encourage military service and that perhaps the Commission could find ways to translate into policy recommendations.

The first is greater familiarity. Our data from Warriors and Citizens shows that the strongest correlate for having a positive view of the military is knowing a veteran or someone currently in service. That familiarity reduces parental and school counsellor hesitation about

² Brett McGurk and Kori Schake, "Compete With China? Support a GI Bill for Diplomacy," *Washington Post*, May 13, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/compete-with-china-support-a-gi-bill-for-diplomacy/2019/05/13/79823b80-7330-11e9-8be0-ca575670e91c_story.html?utm_term=.375056709b85.

recommending or supporting military service as a career choice, and is a major factor in why so many children of service women and men elect military service for themselves.

The second is finding ways for civic leaders and celebrities and politicians to model behaviour that gets beyond thanking people for their service. Because while TYFYS is really nice, it tends to create distance between society and the military. It tends to leave a stilted silence rather than begin a conversation. And thanking service men and women is learned behaviour – we taught ourselves how to do that, so we can teach ourselves to move beyond it to a few questions that show people with no familiarity of the military how to connect. Asking “what made you choose military service?” or “what’s your speciality?” or “where have you been stationed that you’ve really enjoyed?” or “how often do you have to move your family?” My experience is questions like those invite service men and women to share their experience and feel included in the broader civic whole.

I would, however, caution against endorsing universal national service on the argument that only a small proportion of our public does military service. Our culture has grown so deferential to those among us who do military service that we have a tendency to feel guilty that only 1% of our citizenry shoulder the burdens of protecting the country. That guilt is misplaced, and bad for healthy civil-military relations.

Less than one percent of Americans are in military service because our modern military only requires 1,281,900 in active duty and another 801,200 in the reserve components. They do bear a greater burden than most of the rest of us, but fetishizing military service inverts the unlevel playing field that is the subordination of our military to civilian control and distances the women and men in our military from the rest of society. The best way to honor military service is to treat it as we treat firemen, emergency room doctors and nurses and technicians, police, and teachers: people who provide essential public goods and often put themselves in great danger on our behalf.

So we should welcome that public attitudes are shifting to reflect less anxiety by those that are not in military service. Polling done by YouGov for Jim Mattis’ and my book *Warriors and Citizens* shows that the public is much less sentimental about ‘the 1%’ than the military is about itself. The general public considers military service now that we have a volunteer force to be a compact, wherein those in service are compensated and provide a public good.

Rather than fetishizing military service, we ought to provide non-military options for young Americans to have the experience of serving a cause bigger than themselves, as John McCain described it. Give them options so that they can pursue known areas of interest or cast their nets widely to explore potential professions. We have no shortage of work that needs doing to advance our public good.

How to pay for it is, of course, the problem.

With apologies I can't be there in person, please know I'd be happy to answer in writing any questions from the staff or Commissioners.

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