

May 25, 2019

Dear Chairman Heck and Members of the Commission:

Thank you for the invitation to share my views with the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service. My expertise is as a historian of the U.S. Selective Service System. I have been studying the origins and consequences of the Cold War draft for close to a decade. My book *Rough Draft: Cold War Military Manpower Policy and the Origins of Vietnam-Era Draft Resistance*, will be published by Cornell University Press in September 2019.

As a historian, I hesitate to advocate any specific policy proposals. My sense, however, is that Selective Service has functioned best when its goals have been most clearly divorced from any purpose other than the military defense of the nation. Whatever policy proposals the Commission chooses to forward to Congress, I would argue that those related to military manpower procurement and registration should be separated as fully as practicable from those related to civic engagement. Historically, significant and unintended consequences have resulted whenever Selective Service has been used as a tool of social engineering.

The Selective Service's practice of manpower channeling, which operated roughly between 1955 and 1965, provides the agency's most egregious example of mixed messaging. When then-Director Lewis B. Hershey chose to use draft deferments as a means to pressure men to enter occupations and domestic arrangements the Selective Service defined as vital to national security, the agency inadvertently exacerbated men's already existent ambivalence toward military service. Whereas men, on average, have always looked for ways to avoid military service, including during times of conscription (thus justifying the need for a draft in the first place), manpower channeling intensified individual men's propensity to consider service as someone else's responsibility, particularly among members of the white middle- and upper-classes (not coincidentally the demographic least likely to serve in the AVF).

The Selective Service created manpower channeling for a number of reasons, both pragmatic and idealistic. Among other things, Hershey hoped the Selective Service could become the "storekeeper" of America's manpower, cataloging who was capable of what in the event of a nuclear attack.¹ The I-Y deferment was eventually created, in Hershey's words, to stop "large numbers of our young men" from believing that they were "useless for the primary duty of citizenship."² In its own publications, therefore, the Selective Service defined the work performed by deferred men as the equivalent of military service in the fight against communism.

¹ Lewis B. Hershey, "Storekeeper of Manpower," *Selective Service*, July 1956, 1-2.

² Lewis B. Hershey, "Selective Service Obligations," *Army Digest*, Nov. 1959, 36-37.

Most deferred men, on the other hand, defined their own deferments in no such terms. Most breathed a sigh of relief at having escaped the draft. Men with I-Y deferments rarely considered the vital civil defense role they could play in the event of a national emergency. When draft calls escalated in 1965, white middle-class and affluent men tended to view their deferments as a right the State owed them rather than military service as an obligation they owed to the State.

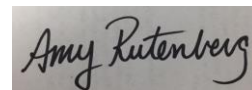
Meanwhile, where manpower channeling targeted middle-class men for deferments, programs originating in the War on Poverty targeted poor, often minority, men for military service. Project 100,000, the Defense Department program designed to “uplift” otherwise ineligible men through military service, is the most (in)famous. Together, these practices and policies led to the inequities of service seen during the Vietnam War, the weakening of the armed forces’ military readiness, and, it can be argued, the death of the draft. Both types of targeting grew out of sincere efforts to strengthen the nation – economically, socially, and militarily. Both backfired badly as historical circumstances changed.

There are other examples of mixed signals and muddled purposes in military manpower policy – the post-World War II attempt to institute a program of Universal Military Training, for example – although I don’t want to waste your time expounding on a history with which you are probably already familiar.

The bottom line is that in any policy proposals relating to registration, the Selective Service, or a potential future reinstatement of conscription, I recommend the Commission lay out clear purposes that focus directly on how best to procure man- and womanpower to defend the nation. In my opinion, if the Commission recommends continued registration, then registrant databases must be kept current. Registration should have a concrete purpose rather than functioning as a purely symbolic act. If the Commission then recommends the registration of women, then such a move must be justified as a method to identify the most talented, qualified *people* to perform the specialized tasks required by a modern, technologically inclined armed force. If the Commission recommends suspending registration, then the future structure of the Selective Service System would also need to be justified based on probable military need. Other arguments simply muddy the waters.

I am certain that I’m not recommending anything members of the Commission don’t already know. But the lesson of history that I have to offer is that in instances when the purposes of military manpower policies and practices became muddled, mixing defense needs with perceived social needs, the already difficult job of staffing the military almost universally became harder.

Thank you for your time, and good luck with your mission. It’s an important one.



Amy Rutenberg, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of History
Iowa State University
arutenbe@iastate.edu