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Dear Fellow Citizen:

For reasons both quixotic and personal, I have been thinking a lot about the role of the military draft in American society. Quixotic because conscription ended in the wreckage of the Vietnam War and today is viewed as ill-equipped to fight the kind of asymmetrical conflicts waged by armed drones and small teams of highly trained U.S. Special Forces. Personal because I was drafted just before the 1953 Korean War cease-fire and served two years in the U.S. Army Counter-Intelligence Corps. Although spared combat, I never doubted that my summoned body and its disposition belonged to Uncle Sam.

I believe that my service, and that of other drafted soldiers in other wars, strengthened our sense of what it means to be a citizen. The so-called All-Volunteer Force that has replaced the short-term citizen-soldier may make sense in today's technology-driven armed services. But without a sharing of sacrifice and risk with the broader population of young people, unintended consequences have weakened the democratic experience. We need to ask: In an era when war is not only undeclared but often unacknowledged, how much does the individual owe to the state as opposed to himself?

In the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld dismissed draftees as of "no value" to the modern military. His remarks seemed to be directed to the Vietnam experience and, with good reason, infuriated its veterans. An article in *American Heritage magazine* (June/July 2003) pointed out that 2.2 million men were drafted during the Vietnam years and some 62 percent of battle deaths were sustained by draftees. "Surely, at least some of the draftees who were shuttled through Vietnam were doing something right," the article concluded.

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The case for a military draft was well expressed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in a speech in July 1940, two months before Congress passed a Selective Service Act in anticipation of the world conflict to come. "In the face of the danger which confronts our time," Roosevelt said, "no individual retains, or can hope to retain, the right of personal choice which free men enjoy in times of peace. He has a first obligation to serve his country in whatever capacity his country finds him useful." Contrast this clear call to duty with what I have been told by college students who argue that a draft would be unconstitutional "because it would interfere with my right to do what I want." Libertarian Ron Paul called the draft a "totalitarian" institution. In his view, it's up to parents to encourage military service, not the government to demand it. So much for John Locke's idea of a social contract with reciprocal responsibilities between governments and their citizens.

A sad vestige of the nation's draft is the moribund Selective Service System and its requirement that if you are a man ages 18 through 25 and living in the United States, you must register with Selective Service within 30 days of your 18th birthday. The penalty for noncompliance? "You may be denied benefits or a job if you have not registered," the System's home page mildly warns. Proving that the draft is a third rail of American politics, a controversy erupted a few years back when Selective Service said it would merely run a *test* of its draft procedures.

Without the leavening virtues of a draft, the public's response to the all-volunteer military has been slightly schizophrenic. Dexter Filkins, a long-time foreign correspondent, points out (*The New Yorker*, Dec. 17, 2012) that after a decade, less than 1 percent of the U.S. population has been involved in our wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. "In all those 'Support our Troops' bumper stickers and campaign applause lines, it has not been difficult to discern a sense of collective guilt," he wrote.

In a newly published book, *Those Who Have Borne the Battle*," James Wright, a former Marine who became president of Dartmouth, acknowledges that revival of conscription is politically implausible. After Vietnam, "it was no longer possible to pretend that military service was an obligation of citizenship in which all shared," he writes. His alternative approach to reconnecting soldiers and society: "There should be no military action authorized by the United States that does not include income- and corporate-tax surcharges...sufficient to cover all the operating costs of the war" and to create "a trust fund to provide for lifetime support for those who serve and sacrifice in the war."

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One of the few voices still calling for a resumption of some form of national service belongs to Thomas E. Ricks, a fellow at the Center for a New American Security. His argument for a revived draft (*New York Times* Op-Ed, July 10, 2012) involves a choice between low-paid military and civilian national service for all youth. Libertarians who object could opt out and in return ask nothing from the government – "no Medicare, no subsidized college loans and no mortgage guarantees." This is surely a political nonstarter. But Ricks, author of *The Generals: American Military Command From World War II to Today*, argues that our relatively small military is "hugely expensive" while "unmarried conscripts don't need much of a safety net." A surprising convert to a reinstatement of the draft is Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, former commander of international forces in Afghanistan. "I think if a nation goes to war, every town, every city needs to be at risk," he said last June at the Aspen Ideas Festival.

Perhaps the most thoughtful critique of the nation's shift to an all-volunteer military force came from then Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates in a 2010 lecture at Duke University. While extolling its performance, he said we "should not ignore the broader, long-term consequences of waging these protracted military campaigns employing – and re-employing -- such a small portion of our society in the effort." He, too, worried about the growing financial costs associated with an all-volunteer force. (Between 2001 and 2010, the amount of money the military spent on personnel and benefits nearly doubled.) But his greatest concern was the fact that "whatever their fond sentiments for men and women in uniform, for most Americans the wars remain an abstraction." He warned of "the risk over time of developing a cadre of military leaders that politically, culturally, and geographically have less and less in common with the people they have sworn to defend." Alas, Gates's farsighted views received little attention in the media and none on Capitol Hill or at the White House. (See the transcript at www.Defense.gov.)

For all its failings, conscription was a litmus test of our nation's willingness to go to war -- with conviction. For most of our history, the draft put our own sons at risk, not just the sons of others. Today's war on terror has been so broadly defined that it promises to be a series of conflicts without end. Meantime, all the problems of equity and shared sacrifice remain unaddressed.

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