

One years national
service should not be
a requirement for all
citizens essays ex...

[Profession](#), [Student](#)



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Introduction

This essay provides reasons why a mandatory period of national service (either civilian or military) for all young U. S. citizens is not a good idea. The concept of universal service arises from time to time, and in this instance surfaced following remarks made by General Stanley McChrystal at the 2012 Aspen Ideas Festival. He is quoted as saying that “ our notion of ‘ service’ had become dangerously narrow, with less than one percent of Americans serving in our military, and challenged us to explore new pathways and opportunities for service to country.” Those remarks of his triggered the Aspen Institute to launch a project called the Franklin Project, which promotes the concept that every young American would “ voluntarily” serve their country for one year, in the decade between the ages of 18 and 28 (“ The Aspen Institute Franklin Project” n. d.).

The Arguments

As mentioned above, the idea of universal service surfaces from time to time. In 2002 Chapman published a comprehensive article explaining in

detail why it is a bad idea – ten years before General McChrystal sparked off a fresh round of debates on the subject. Prior to detailing his reasoning, Chapman opens his article by stating categorically that: “ Universal service never was a good idea, and it grows worse with time. It fails militarily, morally, financially, and politically.” He claims that for almost a hundred years there have been various attempts to enlist all the nation’s youth in universal service, although the justifications given change with time. In his view, other than in times of major conflicts such as the Civil War and World Wars I and II, there has never been a satisfactory justification for universal service.

Chapman’s first argument is that there really is no military basis to support universal service, and reminds us that the USA ended the draft many years ago because they did not need all those people in the armed forces. The need of the modern forces was for fewer personnel who would serve for longer terms than the duration of conscription. In addition, because there were various ways that those determined not to be drafted could find ways around it, it became an unfair process. Also, Chapman considered that those objecting to military service and instead serving the country in some non-military manner were not doing their fair share compared with those who were not “ conscientious objectors.” Further, Chapman believes that while the draft existed, the administration took advantage of the situation and the pay of those serving in the armed forces was low. As a consequence, many who might have decided to make their career in the military chose not to do so. When the draft ended and pay rates were raised, there was no longer a shortage of recruits. In fact those running today’s “ increasingly

sophisticated, highly trained military” are considering reducing numbers still further. They want their serving personnel to be long-term only and do not support a return to conscription. There is also the consideration that someone serving for just a year would spend most or all of that time being trained to meet basic military capability standards and would then be leaving – a huge waste of resources.

Chapman also addresses the moral argument against universal service. He regards attempting to justify universal service on the basis of morality as a serious mistake. It can only be considered as morally right if there is complete freedom of choice – no pressure to comply. Depriving citizens of their absolute liberty to decide yes or no to universal service is immoral. There are many ways that an individual can choose a path in life that does serve his/her country without being pressured into conforming to a government edict to serve in a specific way. He adds that other than in wartime situations, it is only countries under totalitarian regimes that conscript a labor force for some government purpose, or even as a part of an indoctrination process. Disturbingly, there are signs of this authoritarian mentality in the USA today. For example, many U. S. high schools require students to perform a specified amount of “ community service” in order to qualify for their diplomas. Chapman suggests that the idea does not instill in students a sense of civil calling, but instead results in students learning how to “ play” the system, so that he/she manages to do the minimum possible to qualify. Furthermore, Chapman asks, if this “ service” ethos is becoming the norm in high schools, why then is more needed after leaving school?

Another valid argument propounded by Chapman against universal service is

what he categorizes as causing “unintended consequences.” For example, whilst it is probably true to say that most young people today trust our administration and have a strong sense of patriotism, imposition of mandatory universal service could change that. Many would see that as not only a waste of taxpayer’s money, but also as interference with personal freedom and an interruption of educational and career developments and objectives. Another unintended consequence cited by Chapman could be abuse of the system (as was alleged to have happened in the days of the draft), whereby those with parents having influence are assigned “cushy” duties, leaving the less attractive roles to be taken on by others without influential connections.

Perhaps the most powerful argument against universal service is that of the costs involved. Chapman estimates that direct costs per “volunteer” would include “assembling, sorting (and sorting out), allocating, and training several million youth in an unending manpower convoy.” Then there would be the indirect costs such as clothing, medical services, insurance, housing, law enforcement, etc. Overall, Chapman estimates a total cost of up to \$30,000 per “involuntary volunteer.” Add to that the indirect costs for the administration in removing those (say) four million people annually from the country’s labor pool. Overall, Chapman estimates an annual cost of universal service to the economy of \$120 billion. He suggests that it would be far better value if the government were instead to spend even a fraction of that amount of money in teaching youngsters about the workings of our economy and how they as future voters can participate in it successfully. Contrary to imposing “voluntary” service on the younger generation, the government

should ensure that voluntary service as a concept is praised, rewarded, and revered. He concludes by stating that: “ Voluntary service blesses the one who serves as well as those to whom he renders service. Universal service would be civic virtue perverted into a civic vice.”

A month or so after General McChrystal made his comments at the Aspen Festival, Harwood joined the voices of opposition in the Guardian (11 July 2012). His article referred to a follow-up proposal made in the New York Times by “ influential Defense blogger Thomas Ricks,” who came up with the idea of a three-way choice for high school graduates. Option one would be 18 months military service on low pay, but giving entitlement to free college tuition in return. Option two required two years service in the military.

However, in exchange they would receive certain benefits, such as help to fund tuition. The third option would be simply to opt out, but choosing that option would mean that those individuals would lose entitlement to benefits such as Medicare, college loan subsidies, and guarantees on mortgages. This last option suggested by Ricks appears to overlook the fact that those who opt out will still be financing those same benefits for the conscripts.

Essentially, all three of those options involve a form of coercion or pressure. Principally though, the issue is that all three options constitute a negation of the concept of a liberal society. As Harwood points out, “ conscript” and “ slave” are both terms that describe people who “ no longer own themselves.”

Similar adverse sentiments with regard to the idea of universal national service are expressed by Lind (July 2012). His article “ No, America doesn’t need a national service” describes national service as “ at the top of my

personal list of Perennial Doomed Ideas.” He equates that idea as equally unworkable / impractical along with “ a basic minimum cash income for all citizens and a single flat tax.” Whilst Lind sees the idea of national service appealing to some as a concept of equality, he believes it is also not practical. Far from needing more services personnel, America simply needs “ fewer wars.” Our country needs a highly-trained technically capable military, as opposed to a larger army of “ reluctant draftees.” Echoing the views of others such as Chapman, Lind asserts that the regular military do not want to have to “ baby-sit teenagers” who are there for just a few months. Similarly, just as the draft ended because it was no longer needed, the rationale for a parallel civilian alternative ended with it.

Lind concedes that there has always been in the U. S. what he calls “ a small but vocal group” supporting the concept of civilian national service, but claims that their support is for less noble reasons, and is actually to avoid the sons of the elite families being compelled to endure hardship in the military and to be forced to mix with the lower classes. However, Lind sees no evidence that such class-mixing would have long term beneficial effects. Constitutionally, Lind states that according to elements of the libertarian right, the drafting of citizens in peacetime violates the 13th Amendment, “ which bans ‘ involuntary servitude’ except for convicted criminals.” And for those who might claim that a “ civilian army of teenage conscripts” could satisfy “ unmet needs” the only too obvious rejoinder is that if those unmet needs really existed, there would be entrepreneurs clambering over each other to provide them. Sadly, the idea of civilian national service looks suspiciously like using teenagers as a cheap pool of labor.

Conclusions

The research has produced clear evidence that not only is the idea of a civilian and/or military national service hugely unpopular with many sectors of society (not just those who would be directly affected), but also that it is impractical and unworkable and would be a huge waste of public funds and resources. Far better to spend just some of that money on more practical options such as educating youngsters in school about civic responsibility.

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