

THE CITIZENS CORPS: A FLAWED PROPOSAL

The United States confronts no immediate threat that would justify a military draft. And yet a number of Senators and Congressmen are endorsing "voluntary" conscription. Last month Senator Sam Nunn, the Georgia Democrat, and Representative Dave McCurdy, the Oklahoma Democrat, introduced legislation to create a national service entitled The Citizens Corps. The Nunn-McCurdy bill would require those young Americans who need most forms of federal student aid to serve up to two years in the military, followed by four to six years of reserve service or at a minimum complete one year of civilian service in schools, rest homes, or slums.

A Voucher System. The system would work like this: national service vouchers, which could be used to purchase housing or higher education, would replace federal student grants and loans. Civilian volunteers, who would serve a minimum of one year, would get a \$10,000 voucher each year. Military volunteers would choose between eight years of reserve service or two years of active military service followed by four years in the reserves. For the eight-year reserve option, a citizen-soldier would receive a voucher worth \$12,000; for the six-year program with two years of active service, a \$24,000 voucher. The current All Volunteer Force would continue to recruit professional soldiers in large numbers; the Nunn-McCurdy plan would leave unchanged its current recruitment program, which permits regular recruits to sign up for terms primarily of three to four years.

National service is a single program with several rationales. Its backers claim that the national service plan would provide more military manpower at less cost, encourage more wealthy and middle-class young people to join the armed services, "mobilize the young to tackle many of the nation's most pressing social problems," encourage upward social mobility, and even "counteract forces in our pluralistic culture that engender anomie and alienation."¹

National service has something to appeal to everyone. Replacing loans with payments for work appeals to some, who believe that federal student aid for college education consists of "handouts." It also may appeal to others who identify "civic spirit" with voluntary or poorly paid work for the government.

National Service and National Defense. Nevertheless national service as envisioned in the Nunn-McCurdy plan is a flawed concept. Would the military component of the Citizens Corps improve U.S. national defense? No, according to a September 1988 study commissioned by the Defense Department. This study concludes that a program such as the national service proposal might force the government to spend tens of millions of dollars on new military

¹ *Citizenship and National Service: A Blueprint for Civic Enterprise* (Washington, D.C.: The Democratic Leadership Council, May 1988), p. 54.

facilities near college towns. The reason: college students who had participated in the military side of the national service program would be required to join the reserves for four to six years, depending on whether they had opted for two years of initial active service, and to accommodate these students, new facilities might be needed in these locations.

Losses in Experience and Dollars. The level of experience of U.S. military personnel would be reduced. Recruits in the All Volunteer Force usually serve three or four years on active duty. Under the Citizens Corps plan, military participants would actively serve two years at most. To offset the reduction in experience levels caused by a high proportion of two-year citizen-soldiers, the armed services might have to spend more to increase the benefits under the G.I. Bill to recruit soldiers for the longer terms necessary to train military specialists. The Defense Department study concludes that the military service component of the Citizens Corps might cost the taxpayer between \$3.8 and \$9.2 billion in near-term costs alone.

The national service program might help compensate for the shrinking pool of eligible manpower for the military expected in the 1990s. If that is so, a better alternative to the national service plan would be to increase the recruiting budget to attract more qualified young Americans to the military, rather than to create a massive Citizens Corps to fill the ranks of the armed forces.

Backers of the Nunn-McCurdy bill complain that the All Volunteer Force is not sufficiently "representative" of America's different ethnic and economic groups; they say it lacks sufficient numbers of the children of the rich and the upper-class. The Citizens Corps, however, will do little to change this, because only middle-class and poor youth who need college financial aid would be motivated to join the Corps. Lower income students might be better off under an improved G.I. Bill with better education benefits.

Civilian Service: Bureaucrat's Dream. The sponsors of the bill propose to fund programs chosen by the state governments through an independent agency over which Congress would have only limited control. The potential for waste, fraud, and corruption among dozens and perhaps hundreds of jurisdictions is immense. Not only would federally funded state and local bureaucrats have torrents of new money, they would also have armies of middle-class high school graduates performing menial labor for the state at subsistence wages.

The proponents of the Citizens Corps speak of an "ethic of equal sacrifice" and claim that they are concerned about a lack of equality in American society. But the Citizens Corps proposal would impose far greater burdens on middle-class and working-class Americans than do current federal college aid programs. Students who could not afford college without some forms of federal aid would have to lose at least one year of their lives (two, in the case of military service) to menial labor for big government, while the wealthy still would be able to send their children directly to expensive private colleges and universities.

America's youth can justly be asked to submit to a military draft if the U.S. ever needs one. But they should not be asked to serve as cheap labor for the government bureaucracy so that they can go to college. Young Americans can be asked to die for their country. They should not be encouraged to live for their government.

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For further information:

The Effects of National Service on Military Personnel Programs, a report prepared by Syllogistics, Inc., for the Directorate for Accession Policy, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, September 1988.