

Inquiring Minds topic – 5 January 2018

Phyllis Pachman, Moderator

Would Compulsory National Military Service Make us Better Citizens?

Introduction:

When I was researching today's topic, I learned a few interesting things about the draft in U.S. history:

- First, the wartime draft has been used in four conflicts: the Civil War, WW I, WW II, and the Cold War (which includes both the Korean and Vietnam Wars).
- Second, we have had in our history something known as the peacetime draft. From 1940 to 1973, during both peacetime and periods of conflict, men could be drafted to fill vacancies in the army, navy, airforce, etc through the Selective Service Act. It was used when there weren't enough volunteers for specific jobs, even when we weren't at war.
- When our last draft ended in 1973, the government decided to keep the Selective Service System in place as a contingency plan. That means that, even today, without a peacetime draft, all male civilians between the ages of 18 and 25 are required to register with the government so that a draft can take place quickly if needed.

In the article below, General John Kelly, President Trump's chief of staff, said that serving in the military was a unique experience. He suggested that if you haven't served you can't understand the experience, and that you are perhaps ill equipped to engage in a discussion about it. The author of the article also suggested that universal service would bring us closer together as Americans, eliminating the "military vs. civilian" mentality and redefining the role of the military in the life of our country.

Questions to think about:

1. Would the country be more unified if we required everyone to do some military service, bringing people of different backgrounds and economic groups together in a shared, life-changing experience?
2. Could this also be achieved through some kind of alternative national service? And if so, what would that look like?
3. Would required military service give us a more prepared populace in the event of an emergency? (For example Switzerland, Israel)
4. A voluntary military draws from the poorer and less educated in our country. Is this fair?
5. Is conscription itself a violation of our liberty? Is it inconsistent with a democracy? Or is it actually an instrument of equality?
6. If we had universal service, should it include women?

John Kelly Suggests More Americans Should Have the Honor of Serving. He's Right.

By CLYDE HABERMAN

Opinion/*The New York Times* - Oct. 24, 2017

At the risk of belaboring an unfortunate episode that could have been averted with a bit of White House common sense, we need to examine one aspect of John Kelly's equivalent of the St. Crispin's Day speech from "Henry V." This was when Mr. Kelly, the retired four-star general who is President Trump's chief of staff, essentially said that those who haven't served in the military — meaning nearly all Americans — cannot really understand those who have. He may as well have recited "we few, we happy few, we band of brothers" while he was at it.

"We don't look down upon those of you that haven't served," Mr. Kelly said. But then he did exactly that. "In fact, in a way we're a little bit sorry because you'll never have experienced the wonderful joy you get in your heart when you do the kinds of things our servicemen and women do."

Implicit in his remarks was this: If you cannot grasp instinctively what the military goes through, you may well have forfeited the right to criticize it. That point was made explicit by Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary, when she called it "highly inappropriate" to "get into a debate with a four-star Marine general."

Mr. Kelly's statements struck some as offensively patronizing. But they can only bolster the conviction of those among us who believe that reinstating military conscription, or requiring some form of alternative national service, deserves serious consideration — and that the country would be the better for it.

Reviving the draft, abandoned in 1973, would mean that most American families have skin in the game when their political leaders embroil the country in a war of choice. It doesn't take much of an intuitive leap to guess that the last 16 years of war would have

unfolded differently if more than a tiny cadre of America's sons and daughters had to fight.

Requiring everyone to serve in some fashion, other than those too physically or psychically impaired, would be a profoundly democratizing action. In time, it might even encourage more civilized political discourse in this atomized land, by putting young people in proximity to those with roots in different ways of life and thinking. It's harder to sneer at the "other" after you've both shared a life-transforming experience.

Equally important, the military would be better off as well. This was underlined by Mr. Kelly's comments. The armed forces would no longer be cast so readily as standing apart — even above — the rest of society. Across the post-draft decades, praise for the sacrifice of servicemen and servicewomen has become more than the decent thing to do. It is widely seen now as almost holy obligation. Anything short of worship risks heresy. Just as bad, it fans within the military the sort of resentment of civilians that Mr. Kelly gave voice to.

Anyone who's worn the uniform knows full well that the armed services are like any other institution — filled with men and women and customs that, while usually honorable, fall far short of perfection. That goes for generals, too. Bringing back the draft could restore a healthier sense of the military's proper place in our national life. It deserves Americans' full support but not quite the saintlike status that Mr. Kelly assigned it and that the absence of compulsory national service encourages.

Positives of Military Service

- Courage
- Leadership Under Fire
- Unit Cohesion/Sense of Purpose and Mission/Camaraderie
- "Never Leave a Soldier Behind"
- Confidence
- Dedication/Sense of Pride
- Maturity—focus, sense of family appreciation

