

A Superficial 'Sacrifice'

By DAVID J. DANALO

August 25, 2006 -- YOU've seen the forms at your local post office. All males age 18 to 25 must register! It's the law!

Officially, the Selective Service System is a registry of all men aged 18 to 25 that would be passed on to the military when Congress orders a draft. Theoretically, this would happen during time of war. But even since 9/11, we've chosen a different policy of selective service: You can select to serve, or not.

In 1994, President Bill Clinton said that the system is "a relatively low-cost insurance policy against our underestimating the maximum level of threat we expect our Armed Forces to face." With back-to-back rotations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. Army and Marine Corps and their reserve components are facing personnel shortages not seen since the years before World War II. And no help is in sight.

In the 20th century, more than 16 million Americans were inducted into the Armed Forces using Selective Service during time of war. Over a million more were conscripted and honorably served during the peacetime draft of the 1950s. But since June 30, 1973, no American has been impressed into military service.

Those draftees were much more than cannon fodder. United with military professionals, American conscripts won World War II, occupied Western Europe and Japan, and laid the groundwork for eventual victory in the Cold War.

The important variable was not military experience, but commitment, maturity and skill. When the industrial and moral might of the United States was unleashed against her enemies, the unshakable will of the American people really did conquer the world. Not so today. As pundits proclaim a third world war, America frets over Tom Cruise, Paris Hilton and Mel Gibson.

Five years ago, when the United States was attacked and 3,000 civilians murdered, Americans were ready to fight back. Instead of seizing the moral force offered to him, our president ordered us to shrug.

So we did.

In 2003, the United States pre-emptively struck Iraq without a plan to maintain postwar order. Shrug. In 2004, military generals repeatedly requested additional forces for their assigned missions. Shrug. In 2005, the Army Reserve's commanding general said that his force was broken. Shrug. In 2006, the Mexican Army started throwing its weight around on America's porous border, getting into several skirmishes with local law enforcement. Shrug.

And on Tuesday, the Marine Corps announced the recall of up to 2,500 former Marines back into active duty.

Ya think it might be time for a draft? Shrug.

Apparently, the Canadians will have to invade for the draft to ever be used again.

It's not just the civilian leaders. Much of military doesn't want the burdens of training draftees, arguing that volunteers are more motivated and professional. (They also aren't troublesome in

unpopular wars, such as the current one.) The brass see a signature on the dotted line as a necessary safeguard against sagging morale.

To remedy personnel shortages, policymakers in the Defense Department prefer to hire seasoned rogues from Blackwater, construction workers from Kellogg, Brown & Root, and even cooks from India and Bangladesh. With the Pentagon's budget big enough to count as one of the world's 20 largest economies, any personnel shortage can, theoretically, always be solved with money. Six-figure salaries for mercenaries make it easier to fight whenever we please, rather than deal with the inconveniences of an apathetic populace.

The Pentagon's approach might be wrong, but Congress is too cowardly to ever impose a draft against the military's will. In October 2004, the House of Representatives voted 402-2 against a bill to restore mandatory service. Ironically, one of the two dissenting votes came from Rep. Jack Murtha (D-Pa.), who acquired both fame and infamy in later months for his emotional denunciations of the war in Iraq.

The insurance policy of Selective Service has failed. Most in the military think that Americans are unwilling to accept the calling of a draft, so they accept the shortages while screaming for reinforcements. Unfortunately, surveys indicate that they are right: A 2003 USA Today poll found that 52 percent of Americans eligible for conscription would either seek a deferment or simply not serve.

So let's save ourselves some money and dissolve the Selective Service System. At least then we could deal openly with our societal aversion to sacrifice. The posters at post offices have become a dangerous façade.

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