

Selecting Soldiers

The baby boomer generation grew up with a number of specters hanging over their heads. One fear that seemed to hang like an inevitable doom for the childhood and youth of this generation was that of nuclear war and the potential end of life on earth that these weapons could cause if used unchecked.

But there was another much more real threat that was being used with great regularity and it meant a potential fate of death in a war associated activity. That was the specter of the military draft. This form of selecting soldiers was widely used for decades and over many wars and was considered the norm.

The use of conscription was not something the United States Government invented. Civilizations as far back as the Greeks and the Romans used a form of conscription to assure that their armies were supplied with a continuous, healthy flow of young men to serve in the armies of the country, primarily in preparation for warfare. In fact, up until the 1960s in America, it was part of the cultural assumptions that all young men would serve four years of service to their country between high school and college or starting their families.

Like many things related to the military, the horrific war in Vietnam changed that cultural assumption. And the generation to question and finally end the draft in this country was the baby boomer generation. Throughout the sixties, young men lived in constant fear of the draft which, at least in the eyes of baby boomer youth, meant almost certain deployment to Vietnam and almost certain injury or death.

But the horror of the military draft and the resultant imposed service in Vietnam did not strike terror only in the hearts of young men in high school. The war dragged on for such a long time that youth as young as nine and ten years old in the sixties were already making plans to find a way to avoid the inevitability of the draft. Forty years later, it's easy to forget that at that time finding a legitimate way to cause the draft to pass you by was not considered by the prevailing population to be treason or even cowardice. In the eyes of moms and dads, sisters and aunts and uncles, anything they could do to keep their young men from that perceived sentence of death was fair game.

And so once the conflict in Vietnam came to an end, the draft as it was commonly known at the time came to an end. It's to the credit of the military and the heart of American young men that the country has been able to keep a well staffed and well trained military that has largely continued to win on the battlefield even without the draft.

One wonders if the military draft will ever return to common use in this country. The memory of the horror of living under a draft may die out with the baby boomer generation. However, it may be that the cultural change in the way Americans view warfare may not permit the return to such a random way of finding America's bravest and finest to conduct her wars. It's a serious question that has serious results however, the country decides from generation to generation.

We know that America cannot exist without a standing army. There is no question that in the minds of the American citizen that we must maintain a military that is superior in every way to every other army in the world. So can this be done without ever resorting to a draft to supply the armed forces with sufficient force levels to defend the country?

This may be a question that baby boomers themselves may need to decide in the context of the political dialog that happens around elections. For today, we know that the military seems capable of maintaining sufficient might to keep America's enemies relatively at bay despite sporadic attacks. And as long as the military can keep the armies of other countries from disturbing the American way of life, it is unlikely we will see a draft any time soon.

PPPPP 697