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No Justification for a Military Draft

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Rep. Charlie Rangel (D-NY), soon to chair the powerful House Ways and Means Committee, has announced his intention to reinstate the draft. He has offered three different justifications for the reversion to conscription after 33 years of an all-volunteer force: social justice, peace, and better troops.

Social Justice

Rep. Rangel claims that poor people with few opportunities enlist, often driven to military service because of structural unemployment. “If a young fellow has an option of having a decent career, or joining the Army to fight in Iraq, you can bet your life that he would not be in Iraq,” he said on FOX News Sunday (11/26/2006). This serious charge—that the most vulnerable citizens are being hauled away to fight in corporate America’s wars of choice while the elite are snow-skiing—is untrue.

According to military data analyzed by The Heritage Foundation, U.S. troops come from wealthier neighborhoods than their civilian peers.¹ In fact, the only underrepresented neighborhoods are those with the lowest incomes.

FOX News’s Chris Wallace challenged Rangel on recruit incomes during a Sunday interview. Wallace asked, “Isn’t the volunteer army better educated and more well-to-do than the general population?” Rangel replied, “Of course not.”

Rangel did not refute the evidence about incomes, but he did make a new claim about current military volunteers. “And most all of them come from communities of very, very high unemployment,” he said. This claim may have some basis in fact, but my initial review of military data shows

otherwise. The report I authored includes a detailed list of participation rates by state.² (See Chart 1) For example, the state of New York has an enlistee-population ratio of 0.72, meaning that New Yorkers are underrepresented in the military recruits of 2005 by 28 percentage points. New York has a low unemployment rate as well, at 4.0 percent. Montana, however, has an even lower unemployment rate but has the highest military enlistee-population ratio of any state in the nation at 1.57.

The correlation between unemployment and enlistment rates among the 50 states is negative, not positive, and it is also statistically insignificant at minus 10.7 percent.

Peace

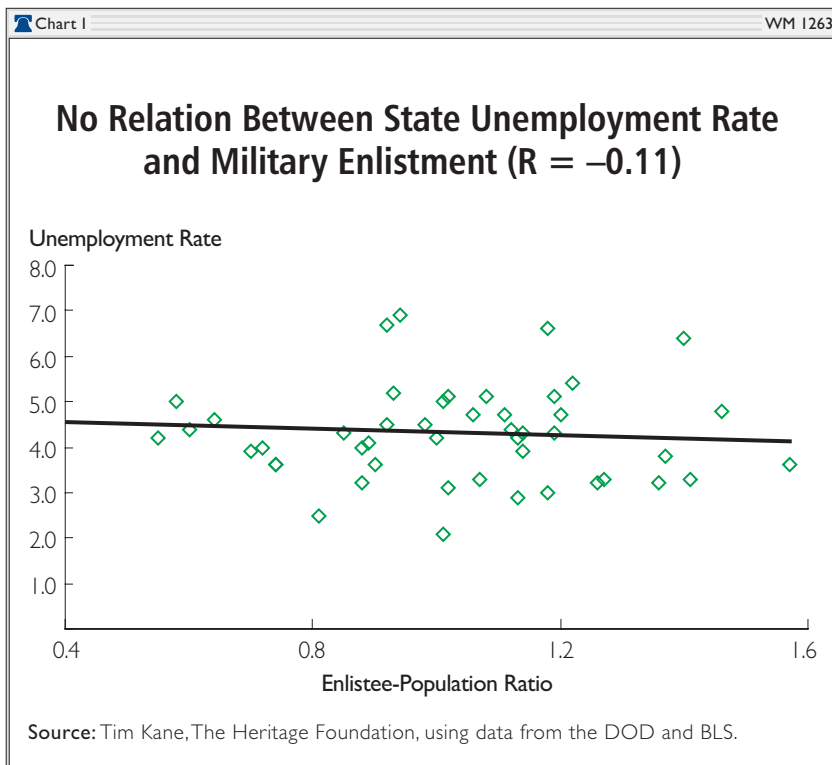
Rep. Rangel also argues that war is less likely under a draft because policymakers would not want to put their own loved ones in harm’s way. “There’s no question in my mind that this president and this administration would never have invaded Iraq, especially on the flimsy evidence that was presented to the Congress, if indeed we had a draft and members of Congress and the administration thought that their kids from their communities would be placed in harm’s way,” he said.³ Indeed, the Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq war were fought with a volunteer

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army, but the Korean War and Vietnam War were fought with conscript armies. There is simply no substance to the argument that a draft keeps the peace, but it must be said that “draft wars” were fought with higher troop levels, and higher casualties.⁴

In the last 60 years, America has fought two wars with conscription and two wars without. The logic that conscription was the critical determining variable does not hold.

The revolution in military affairs began after the military converted to all-volunteer soldiers. Soldier pay increased, and the value of human capital led to a transformation towards a more technologically advanced force.

Better Troops

Rangel’s insinuates that the military would obtain better troops through a draft than it has through the volunteer force. However, it is difficult to see how motivation and morale would increase if the ranks were filled by random draw.

It is certainly not the case that current enlistees are poorly educated. For instance, the average serviceman reads at an entire grade level higher than his civilian counterpart. High school graduation rates for war-

time recruits are fully 17 percent higher than for U.S. civilians aged 18–24.

The all-volunteer force has had immense success in drawing highly motivated individuals through better pay. America’s military leadership is adamantly opposed to instituting a new draft. The generals and admirals argue that a draft would weaken mission capability and create enormous structural and management problems. Morale and force cohesiveness would suffer intensely, particularly with a two-caste military.

The Threat to Individual Liberty

Regardless of Rangel’s arguments, justification of a “just draft” presents a philosophical dilemma. Coercing people to serve is detrimental to individual liberty—this is the problem of social justice based on group demographics rather than individuals. The U.S. military is one of the most colorblind, merit-based institutions in the nation. Soldiers surrender their individuality voluntarily to join a team, with a team mentality. Mandating service will diminish this choice.

Even if Rangel and his colleagues in power rename their project “national service,” it would still be unjust, because forced volunteerism is inauthentic. Certainly, Americans will sometimes accept restrictions on their liberty, such as the speed limit or income tax, but only to advance the common good. Empowering the central government to oversee and restrict the employment of all young Americans for two years is not consistent with common good restrictions and is instead a dangerous violation of individual liberty.

The Pentagon, the President, Congress, and the new Democratic leadership need to repudiate the idea of a draft as well as the notion of mandatory volunteerism. All young Americans deserve the peace of mind that their personal freedom is not in jeopardy.

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