

A nation of draft dodgers

By Dennis Laich

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In a recent *Military Times* article titled “Dodging and deferring: Trump wasn’t the only POTUS to avoid the draft,” former Assistant Secretary of Defense Lawrence J. Korb pointed out that former commanders in chief attending the inauguration of Joe Biden avoided military service through draft deferments available to them as a result of their socio-economic status. He draws attention to one aspect of the historic, systemic: unfairness of the way America has manned its military going back to 1861 and continuing through the fundamentally unfair all-volunteer force.

In 1861, when the Union could not secure a sufficient number of volunteers to fight the Civil War, the government instituted conscription and included a provision for substitution and commutation. This provision allowed a draftee to pay \$300 to another man to serve in his place. Most Americans today are unaware of this provision and appalled by its undemocratic, unpatriotic nature. Although conscription practices were generally viewed as fair during WWI and WWII, the Vietnam-era draft policies were broadly viewed as unfair as deferments and exemptions were available to the wealthy and well connected, leaving the fighting to patriots and the less privileged. Vietnam, like the Civil War, became a “rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight.”

Today, America has been involved in endless wars for 20 years. And today, 330 million Americans lay claim to rights, liberties, and security that not a single one of them is obligated to protect and defend. The all-volunteer force has granted all Americans an exemption from this obligation. Military service falls predominantly to those in the third and fourth socio-economic quintiles and the first quintile is AWOL. The “volunteer” system is propped up by unprecedented enlistment bonuses that are disproportionately attractive to the poor and irrelevant to the wealthy.

Enlistment bonuses of \$40,000 are being offered today to “volunteer” to serve in our nation’s military. Americans appalled by substitution and commutation may find the following historical connection disconcerting. If you apply an inflation rate of 3 percent to \$300 from 1861 to 2021, it comes out to approximately \$31,000. Those appalled by the practices of 1861 are willing enablers of the same practices being employed in their names by their government today. Is it a “volunteer” system when you pay someone to “volunteer?”

Responsible Americans disturbed by this one example of the unfairness inherent in the all-volunteer force should be willing to engage in a fact based dialogue that addresses the fairness, efficiency, and sustainability of the all-volunteer force. This is a dialogue that affects not only national security but also the social fabric of our democracy.

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