An Analysis of Conscription

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Background

Conscription is the use of state force to directly compel civilians into military service. Unlike other forms of government intervention, which typically force a citizen to pay for the acts of the state, conscription actively requires citizens to act as an agent of the state. This changes the nature of the beast. Where the state was the immoral body acting against citizens, it now becomes one with the citizenry forcing it to commit its crimes, and forcing them to take just as much blame.

In spite of the obvious anti-liberty nature of conscription many of those who have generally been proponents of liberty, such as Ludwig Von Mises, have been willing to support conscription under some circumstances. They see conscription as a necessary evil when a nation is in dire straits. However, like all other forms of intervention conscription has specific negative consequences that must be examined. In order to refute the claim that one must support conscription for the good of the nation it must be shown why we need to oppose conscription for the good of the nation.

Like all state policies conscription requires the elite minority to compel the actions of the majority. This requires some level of acceptance of the policy on the part of the oppressed majority. If this majority favors individual rights, as western culture once did, then conscription will be seen as incompatible with those rights and be untenable.
However, while the idea of conscription may have been unthinkable at one point in history, culture and economic changes may have allowed that system to be accepted. It would seem that the viability of conscription at a particular place and time is directly proportional to the popularity of the war being fought at the time. When a war is seen as just by a population they are more willing to contribute to the war effort, providing even the greatest sacrifice for what is seen as a righteous cause. If society backs these efforts then resistance to conscription will be minimal.

The pattern is quite obvious in American history. A society that initially accepts the rights of individuals eventually deteriorates to a general acceptance of nationalism and conscription. Today the idea of a national army is taken for granted and the legitimacy of the draft is not questioned. The only question is whether or not it should be used in any specific situation. This is not how it always was. During the American Revolution, plans for mass conscription were rejected (in spite of George Washington’s best efforts). At the founding of the United States the idea of a national military was rejected, because it was believed state militias should bear the burden of defense. Without a national army no real plan of conscription could be enacted.

The opposition of a national army continued until the War Between the States. Not to say there were not those in the government who did not favor a national army and nationwide conscription. There were various attempts to enact nationwide conscription, all of which failed. Even during the War of 1812 while Washington was being burned to the ground the idea of conscripting a national army was defeated, largely due to threats from New England states that they would secede if conscription were enacted (Wamsley
24). At that time the largely free market culture in the United States rejected conscription as a form of white slavery.

During the War Between the States, both sides conscripted soldiers to varying degrees of success. In the north, the idea caused violent riots. In the south, where the culture was more accepting of the practice and the war was seen as more legitimate, they were able to draft one third of their army compared to just eight percent of the union army (Clifford 32). While it was not particularly successful at raising a Union army the northern draft forever changed the landscape of American culture. The idea of a militia as defense was dead in the United States, and from then on America was defended by a national military.

In World War I a draft plan passed rather easily, as American culture had already been transformed to accepting the legitimacy of the draft (Wamsley 31). During the course of the war America drafted some two and a half million soldiers (Kusch 132). When the draft was enacted it was widely accepted as a legitimate institution for achieving the forces necessary to fight what was by 1917 a relatively popular war. This draft also had the intended secondary effect of increasing enlistment (most likely among those who would prefer to choose which branch to serve in whether than to face the front line duties the draft promised) even to the point where the Selective Services board stopped enlistment by December of 1917.

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1 Whether or not this was caused by conscription or the right to buy out of service is a debated topic, and will not be discussed here
2 Desertion was a problem in both the north and the south. However, violent riots plagued the north which managed to procure just 43,000 troops out of 300,000 draftees (Kusch 16)
3 This is not to say a majority of American’s favored the war simply that more American’s favored it then would favor Korea and Vietnam.
After World War I widespread opposition to a standing army began the
demobilization slightly after Armistice Day, November 11, 1918. However, by the end of
the 1930’s it was obvious that peace would not last in Europe and the Roosevelt
administration began a policy of advocating a “defensive” draft. In 1940 America began
its first peacetime draft. Over the course of the war this draft proceeded much like the
draft of World War I (both wars were relatively popular, thought of as defensive) even to
the point of stopping enlistment. The only major difference between the two drafts was
the magnitude. About four times as many soldiers were conscripted in World War II.

After World War II the draft was temporarily suspended for one year in 1947,
before being reinstated. After World War II the United States became involved in a
variety of unpopular foreign endeavors. At this time the draft became substantially less
popular. Whereas draft protests were relatively rare during World War I and World War
II, they became a staple of the Vietnam generation. For the Vietnam War over sixty
percent of draft eligible men actively pursued ways to reduce their chances of being
drafted (Kusch 69). One study found that over one million men avoided the draft by
feigning medical problems. That is a significant proportion considering only 1.7 million
were drafted (Kusch 72 and 132).

From a natural rights perspective, the idea of conscription is incomprehensible. If
Rothbard is right and states do not have a right to tax a citizenry to defend the nation,
then they surely do not have the right to force citizens into service (Rothbard 193). Even
if one were to accept the premise that a defensive war would be a sure loss without
conscription, then it would still not be justified in sending conscripts to fight. It is the
individual’s responsibility to determine how much value he places in protecting his
property from foreign invaders, if he does not feel it is worth his life, then to force him to risk his life is an unwarranted act of aggression.

If conscription is unjustifiable from a natural rights perspective, then the question becomes what causes a nation to rely on conscription. Under what circumstances will a nation employ conscription as a means of raising an army? It is important to note that while certain conditions make a draft more likely, no situation guarantees conscription. Cultural factors weigh heavily into whether a nation will conscript. However, in general the more aggressive a nation is and the less capitalist a nation is (these two things are normally related) the more likely a nation is to rely on conscription.

When a nation stops using its armed forces for defense reasons and begins to employ them in various aggressive pursuits around the world, that nation will face a double burden hampering their armed forces. First, as a nation begins to send its military to foreign wars it experiences a dramatic increase in the costs of maintaining this army. The movement of troops and use of weapons greatly increases the military expenditures of a nation. At the same time an aggressive foreign policy undoubtedly results in the combat deaths of many soldiers. This not only reduces the popularity of military service in a nation but forces a nation to refill the ranks of fallen soldiers. As the military budget becomes strained and the costs of soldiers increases a government with limited means is forced to either reduce its aggression or conscript its military. Of course if the culture has already mutated to the point of accepting government intervention in foreign affairs, it is likely to accept the practice of conscription.

While this explains conscription for an aggressive nation, it does not describe the presence of conscription in rare cases where the conscripting nation is actually acting
defensively. In these cases it is almost invariably the result of the government’s poor policies which ruin the ability of an economy to produce. If a nation has used protectionist tariffs to allow inefficient industries to operate or taxed industry until the point it was destroyed then during the war the nation will be unable to raise the necessary resources to fight an effective, efficient war. When these nations are invaded (or even in the case where they decide to invade other nations) their governments will forcefully allocate all resources to the war effort which includes human labor. This type of conscription is not generally based on the size of the nation being invaded, but only on its ability to effectively allocate resources. This explains why plans to conscript during defensive wars among capitalist nations generally fails (such as the previously mentioned example of the War of 1812).

While it may be true that the more aggressive a nation is and the more that nation has strayed from capitalism the more likely they are to practice conscription, this is not a universal law. Cultural circumstances play a strong factor in determining how likely conscription will be. The only thing we can say with certainty is that a socialist nation must conscript its army and that a truly capitalist country cannot conscript an army. The reason for this is obvious. If a socialist nation did not conscript an army no one would serve in the army, as the central planning authority must allocate all human resources including those in the army. If a capitalist nation were to implement a plan of conscription it would by definition require a manipulation of the market, destabilizing the economy as a whole.
Effects of Conscription

While the natural rights argument may be sufficient grounds on its own to oppose conscription, it will hardly convince those who only advocate utilitarian approach to ethics. For them, we must show that conscription itself has actual negative side effects. Which would be sufficient on their own to stop the practice. For conscription these effects are obvious. The use of conscription forces society to undergo a variety of negative economic and cultural changes, not only during the time of conscription but after the war has long ended.

When a country conscripts soldiers it artificially reduces the workforce in society. This artificial reduction in the supply of labor increases the price of labor and in turn reduces the quantity demanded, thus reducing the overall number of goods and services a society produces. Since these parties do not stop consuming goods, food and supplies are still shipped to them overseas, this causes a lower standard of living than a society would normally experience.

For a nation using temporary conscription this means that the limited number of goods not allocated for government use during a crisis will be reduced. However, in nations that have continual conscription (such as Spain or South Korea), this acts as a forced emigration, intentionally reducing the supply of labor in impoverished countries to

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4 It may be the intention of countries that employ universal service to artificially reduce the supply of labor to increase the wages of those fortunate enough to find a job in a typically socialist economy.
5 The actual magnitude of this effect may be minimal as the same conditions that allow a government to impose the draft allow them to skew the workforce as to prevent an economy from producing the goods society demands.
6 This partially explains the forced rationing of food, rubber and steel during the Second World War. The government wanted to artificially reduce competition for those goods it deemed necessary for the war effort.
artificially increase the price of labor. While this does not improve the overall welfare of society, it does allow the government to keep wage levels constant even while the demand of labor falls without causing mass unemployment.\(^7\)

Aside from the overall effect of reducing the labor force, conscription has other temporary effects. When a government chooses to protect certain segments of the population from conscription there is an artificial influx into these fields. When the United States entered the Second World War, special interest groups were able to convince local draft boards that agriculture was in need and they were thus granted special protection from the draft (Blum 76). This reversed the trend of agriculture jobs leaving to the industrial sector and actually increased farm productivity (Blum 88).\(^8\) A similar pattern occurred when the United States entered Vietnam and college enrolment boomed.

Aside from those nations that practice mandatory national service, almost all of these effects are alleviated when conscription has ended and the majority of the conscripts are sent home. However, the effects of conscription are not ended at this point. Returning veterans often request and receive government assistance in job training, placement, medical bills and other social benefits. The use of conscripted soldiers allows the government to justify increased benefits for these soldiers. By advocating for those young men who served their country by force they are able to secure public sympathy for these programs. Allowing them to expand the services to levels that would not be possible without conscription.

\(^7\) It will still cause unemployment, but not as much as many of those who would be unemployed are forced to serve in the military, it is appeasing popular demand for high wages and low unemployment by shipping some of the marginal employees over seas

\(^8\) This actually came at the time in which the agricultural workforce was held steady. Presumably, this was a combination of increased selectivity of labor and increased agricultural technology.
From a cultural prospective returning soldiers pose a different problem. When soldiers volunteer for armed service, they do so after calculating the costs and benefits of entering into service and willingly accepting the responsibilities of serving. When a conscript is taken from his normal life and put on the front lines he does so without his consent. As opposed to a volunteer soldier who has prepared himself of the fact that he may need to kill a conscript is forced into a baptism by fire, being forced to fight and kill for causes he may very well disagree with. The psychological effects of being forced to fight cause these men also face a disassociation from society, hampering their ability to live productive lives.

Unfortunately, those who come back to a displaced world are the lucky ones. Many of the men never return and some of those who do are faced with severe disabilities. These men have the unfortunate distinction of paying the true cost of conscription. While other citizens may face a greater financial burden due to the expanded government, shrinking economy and loss of family members, it is those that are killed or permanently disabled that are forced to pay the one-hundred percent tax rate, giving everything to the state by force.

Proponents of Conscription

Modern proponents of conscription see it not only as a necessary means to win a defensive war, but as actually benefiting society as a whole. For them, these positive effects outweigh any negative effects that a draft might have. These arguments take a
variety of forms but most readily rely on one of two ideas, either that conscription reduces the costs of government, or that the use of conscription diversifies the military force.

Those who believe that conscription reduces the costs of government argue that the use of conscription has a net reduction of government, as it requires the state to spend less money for its defense than it would have, thereby reducing the size of the state. Aside from the previously stated fact that conscripted soldiers increase the long term size of governments (as stated above through sympathetic government subsidies, welfare programs and other benefits), this idea ignores the point that those being conscripted are paying essentially a one-hundred percent tax rate. They are forgoing all wages that they would earn in order to satisfy the states demands. So while their meager salary may be less than the state would have to pay for labor on the open market, the real tax rate for society as a whole has not decreased, it has simply decreased among those fortunate enough not to be drafted.

Others want continual conscription for all citizens to promote a diverse military and encourage national service. They advocate with the understand that this type of conscription will increase the size of government, and that is exactly their plan. They want conscription to level the playing field of all citizens, forcing all to contribute the same amount of actual labor into the nations defense.

The problem is that this goal is not a legitimate one. The desire to force all citizens to become active parts of the state is in itself unethical. Forcing citizens to believe that denying state authority will become equivalent to denying their own authority. Aside from the natural problems that come about from increasing the size of
government, and the ethical problem of tying citizen’s morality to actions of government, this policy fails to meet its ostensive goal of providing for the defense of a nation. Instead of using those who would best be fitted for defense, professional volunteer soldiers, they use randomly selected citizens to do this circumventing the market process of the division of labor.

Conclusion

When the state begins conscripting soldiers it does so in part to force those soldiers to bloody their hands with the state’s business. If citizens are forced to be a part of the state’s treachery, they will find it hard to reject the state and its policies. They become unquestioning drones, following the will of the state in every aspect of their lives. This is why those who refused to serve despite being drafted during World War II for reasons of conscience (disagreeing with the states right to act) were given on average six months more prison time than those who simply did not want to serve, without questioning the state’s authority to compel them (Sibley 346).

If a nation has reached the point where conscription is seen as a valid way of raising an army, than that society has accepted the greatest tenant of socialism: the government controls the means of production. This is why when some form of a market economy remains in a society, conscription will never be fully accepted by that society. This is also why even in the most socialist of nations we can find the a priori knowledge to support natural rights, as there is always some resistance to conscription because these people realize, if nothing else, that they should control their labor.
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