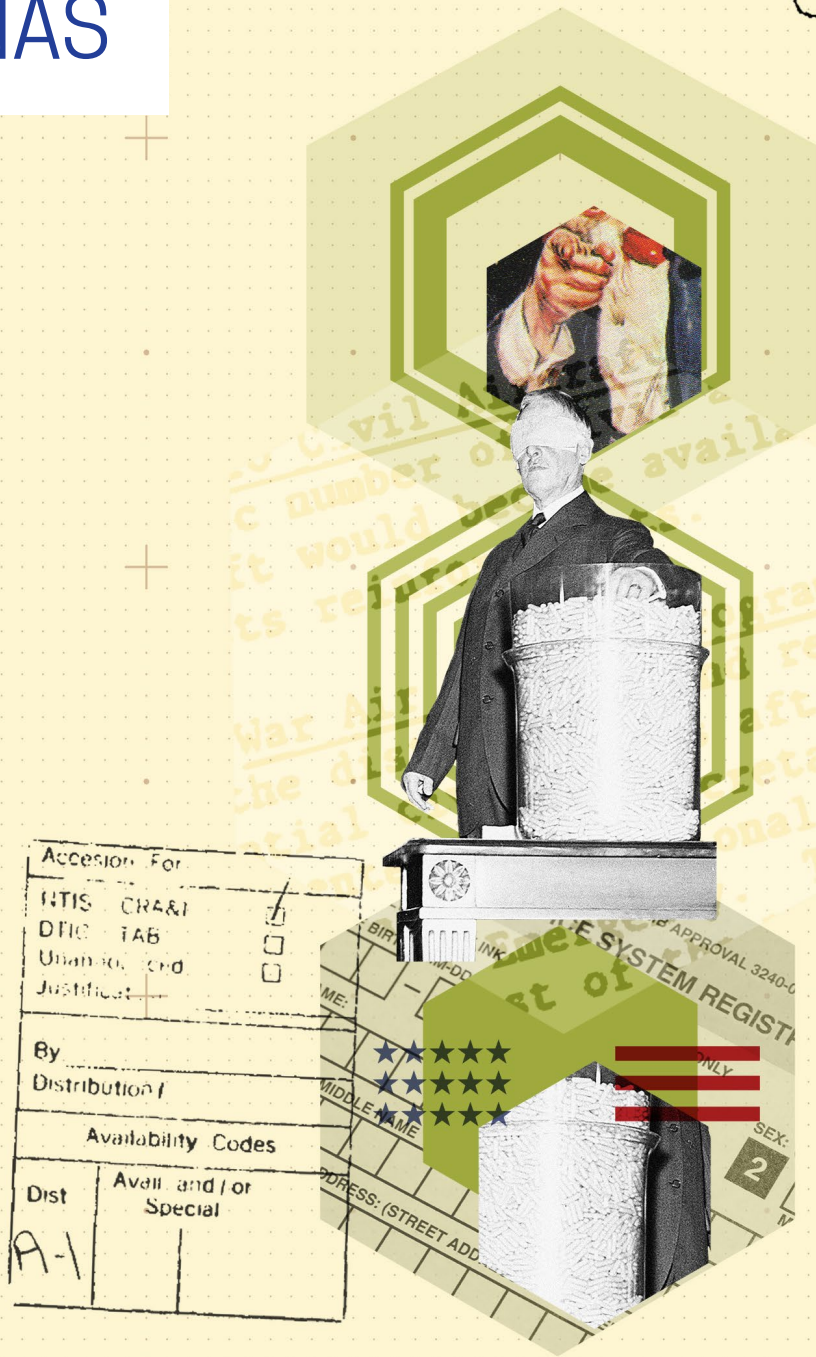




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Back to the Drafting Board

U.S. Draft Mobilization Capability for
Modern Operational Requirements

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The Military, Veterans, and Society Program addresses issues that face U.S. service members, veterans, and their families, including the future of the all-volunteer force, trends within the veteran community, and civil-military relations. The program produces high-impact research that informs and inspires strategic action; convenes stakeholders and hosts top-quality events to shape the national conversation; and engages policymakers, industry leaders, Congress, scholars, the media, and the public in matters pertaining to military personnel, veterans, and civil-military relations.

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While no American president, member of Congress, military leader, or citizen desires the level of conflict requiring a draft, the systems, structures, and processes for implementing a draft must function if needed.

Executive Summary

For the first time since the Cold War, the United States faces threats from great power competitors. These advanced threats—particularly the pacing threat of the People’s Republic of China—have the potential to escalate at an order of magnitude that would yield the nation’s all-volunteer force (AVF) combat ineffective. The stakes would be high in such a conflict and could require the United States to effectively execute a draft and mobilize, should the president and Congress deem it necessary to do so in the face of an existential threat. Yet the United States has not tested the ability to mobilize a draft since the transition to the AVF more than 50 years ago. While no American president, member of Congress, military leader, or citizen desires the level of conflict requiring a draft, the systems, structures, and processes for implementing a draft must function if needed.

The ability to carry out a draft is of strategic interest for the United States for three reasons. First, a strong capacity to execute a draft will be necessary to fight and win a near-peer conflict should the U.S. strategy of deterrence fail. It provides the United States with the ability to mobilize and sustain forces over a longer period, which will be essential in a protracted conflict. Second, if a draft is necessary in a future conflict, time will be of the essence. Lastly, the United States’ ability to execute a draft can serve as a signal to would-be adversaries that the United States has the systems, structures, and human capital in place to prevail in a protracted conflict. Such a signal could have a deterrent effect against adversaries who are hedging against protracted conflict.

Skeptics of the feasibility of a future draft note that the political capital required to institute a draft is so high that no future president or Congress would be willing to support one.¹ Yet precisely because the political stakes of instituting a draft are so high, U.S. lawmakers, policymakers, and military leaders must assume that if a draft were called, it would be absolutely necessary. And if it is necessary, it must work. This report identifies several areas where the United States needs to proactively modernize its draft mobilization capabilities and provides tangible recommendations to ensure the United States can win in a future near-peer conflict.

This report is part of a larger body of literature on the health of the U.S. AVF. It expands the literature on the nation’s ability to generate the human capital needed to deter and, if necessary, execute military requirements to meet the U.S. mission in a future war. It further balances the tradeoffs of having a smaller, high-quality,

professionalized AVF with the ability to rapidly increase troops if needed in the event of a near-peer conflict.

To be clear, this report is not advocating for implementation of a draft. Rather, it is a call to ensure that if the United States ever faced an existential threat requiring the president and Congress to pass a draft, the systems, processes, and structures necessary to successfully execute it would be in place.

This report evaluates potential challenges for future draft mobilization and recommends steps the United States should take in peacetime to strengthen its capacity to execute a draft and mobilize, which in turn will strengthen deterrence.

A Recommendation for the President

If a draft is required, consider the use of older conscripts within the registered population. The president has the authority to prescribe the guidelines for who is drafted into training and service from within the population of individuals “liable for such training and service and who at the time of selection are registered and classified, but not deferred or exempted.”² The current plan for draft mobilization is to begin the draft with individuals who turn 20 in the year a draft is enacted. However, the Selective Service System (SSS) obtains registrations from men ages 18–25. Operational requirements in a future combat environment may mean that individuals with more experience or technical proficiency are needed. In that event, relevant stakeholders may consider older conscripts with additional skills and education more effective.

A Recommendation for the National Security Council

Run regular full-scale mobilization exercises across the whole of government. The National Security Council, Selective Service System, Department of Defense (DoD), military services, and other federal agencies, including the Department of Labor and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, should conduct large-scale mobilization exercises at least once every two years. Given the interagency nature required to incorporate across the whole of government, the National Security Council should be assigned the responsibility for facilitating regular mobilization exercises. The Department of Defense should use the findings of such exercises to incorporate total force planning across elements of strategy, operational plans, resources, and policies.

Recommendations for the Department of Defense

Assess the military operational requirements in a future conflict, enabling a more tailored approach to future draft mobilization. Historical draft mobilization largely treated individual draftees as interchangeable parts. However, future conflict is likely to center on high-end capabilities and require technical proficiency and experience.³ At the same time, the professionalized AVF has experienced a revolution in talent management practices, aligning individual knowledge, skills, and experiences with military requirements. The Department of Defense should analyze the necessary requirements for future conflict and provide the requirements to the Selective Service System. The SSS should then expand the information collected during registration to enable data-informed mobilization.

Appoint and empower the executive agent for national mobilization within the Department of Defense. The Fiscal Year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act requires the secretary of defense to establish an executive agent for national mobilization within the Office of the Secretary of Defense. The executive agent would be responsible for achieving mobilization readiness and addressing congressional mobilization reporting requirements. As of April 2024, the position is not listed as one of the DoD executive agents. Per the law, the executive agent for national mobilization would be responsible for “developing, managing, and coordinating policy and plans” and would be required to report the outcomes of a DoD mobilization exercise to Congress.⁴ The position could be empowered by expanding authorities to include oversight of equipping, transporting, supplying, and training draftees.

The establishment and empowerment of the executive agent for national mobilization will provide a clear DoD-led mobilization integrator. An existing challenge—given the distribution of responsibilities for draft mobilization across the whole of government—is that no one individual or office is fully responsible for effective draft mobilization. Yet the DoD and the military services will be most acutely impacted by the efficiency and effectiveness of a draft, should one be implemented. Having a clear DoD lead with visibility across the mobilization enterprise can provide clear authority and accountability for national mobilization.

Fully resource and staff Military Entrance Processing Stations (MEPS), particularly physical and medical evaluation processes. In recent years, the

confluence of recruiting shortages across the military services and backlogs in MEPS processing timelines exposed a weakness in the nation's ability to rapidly process recruits. Such delays would be compounded if a draft were instituted, necessitating evaluations of up to 500,000 conscripts within 193 days.⁵

Prepare the professionalized force—especially unit-level commanders and noncommissioned officers—to absorb a conscripted force. The integration of conscripts into the professionalized U.S. military is likely to result in both operational and cultural challenges. While much of the training emphasis focuses on the conscripted force, DoD and the military services will also need to prepare the professionalized force to absorb and operate with conscripts through training and education.

Publish an updated Master Mobilization Plan informed by full-scale mobilization exercises. The last public Master Mobilization Plan was released by the assistant secretary of defense for force management policy—now the assistant secretary of defense for readiness and force management—in May 1988.⁶ The current assistant secretary of defense (of readiness and force management) should issue an updated plan with an emphasis on the changing global threat environment and modernizing processes given current human capital constraints. The updated plan should include insights derived from regular full-scale mobilization exercises.

Recommendations for Congress

Identify potential legal challenges and impediments to the institution of a modern draft and address them before a draft is necessary. There is a long history of legal challenges to the constitutionality of the SSS's male-only registration requirement. However, the Supreme Court has held that, given Congress's authority to "raise and regulate armies and navies," the historical restriction on women's combat service, and the combat requirements necessary for future conscription, all-male registration is constitutional.⁷

With combat restrictions on women lifted with no exceptions in 2015, there may now be legal standing for an objection to an all-male draft. The Supreme Court most recently declined to hear a case objecting to the constitutionality of an all-male draft (*National Coalition for Men et al. v. Selective Service System et al.*) in June 2021, citing the need to allow Congress to consider recommendations from the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service (NCMNPS) to update the Military Selective Service Act.⁸ Notably, the

case was not arguing that women should have to register for the draft, but rather that the basis of male-only registration is now unconstitutional. However, Congress has been unable to address changes to the law. If a draft were enacted (and no longer a theoretical question), such a case would likely have legal standing before the Supreme Court. The potential time delays associated with a legal challenge of that magnitude would severely hamper the federal government's ability to execute a draft adequately and efficiently in a situation where time would be of the essence. The questions raised by this legal challenge could threaten to undermine the enforcement of the draft.

Congress should therefore preemptively address the issue of all-male SSS registration and follow the NCMNPS recommendation to extend SSS registration to all Americans, averting future legal challenges and delays to the operational human capital requirements a draft necessitates.

Reconsider criteria for draft postponements, deferments, and exemptions. Criteria for postponement, deferment, or exemption may not reflect current social dynamics or defense-critical industries. Congress should require the executive branch to evaluate the current criteria for exemption and revise standards as necessary for the modern context.

Recommendations for the Selective Service System

Obtain more detailed information regarding individuals in the Selective Service registration process. The current process collects very limited information on men older than 18 and a half years old and younger than 26 years old, including their name, date of birth, Social Security number, and address. To institute a draft more selectively (should one be required), the federal government would benefit from additional information, including educational attainment, chronic medical conditions precluding military service, skill sets, and preferences regarding assignment to the military services and career fields or military occupational specialties.

Educate the public about what conscientious objection means and how conscientious objectors will be used in the event of a conflict. Interviews with senior officials and conscription experts indicate that the public is largely unaware of what may be required of conscientious objectors. While conscientious objector status removes the requirement for combat service, it does not remove the requirement for national service in the Selective Service Alternative Service Program. Misconceptions about alternative service requirements may lead to false assumptions that conscientious objectors are not required to serve in times of national emergency.

Introduction

“We unanimously believe that the nation’s interests will be better served by an all-volunteer force, supported by an effective stand-by draft, than by a mixed force of volunteers and conscripts.”

—Gates Commission Report, 1970⁹

“The ability to mobilize effectively contributes to the deterrence of war.”

—Department of Defense

Master Mobilization Plan, May 1988¹⁰

In July 2023, the United States celebrated the 50th anniversary of the all-volunteer force (AVF). The transition to the AVF marked a shift away from using conscripted forces in the U.S. military and established a professional fighting force. The architects of the AVF, led by members of President Richard Nixon’s Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force (referred to as the Gates Commission), critically evaluated the case against the transition to an AVF and found that the incentives for making such a transition were compelling. An AVF would provide a more professionalized force more capable of ensuring the armed forces necessary to meet the military’s requirement and, in turn, protect the nation’s security. As a result of the analysis conducted between March 1969 and February 1970, the United States transitioned to an AVF in July 1973. When the Gates Commission recommended the transition to the AVF, it stipulated an important caveat, stating that “the nation’s interests will be better served by an all-volunteer force, *supported by an effective stand-by draft*, than by a mixed force of volunteers and conscripts”.¹¹ Despite that caveat, the nation’s experience during the Vietnam War led the American public to question whether the option of a stand-by draft would be politically feasible for any future conflict. In the more than 50 years since, the nation has not been called upon to test its ability to execute a draft in a conflict scenario.

The recent Russia-Ukraine War brings to light the critical nature of human capital in modern conflict. Both Russia and Ukraine face challenges in military recruitment and the complications attendant to conscription—on the battlefield and across society. Both sides have experienced high casualty rates and both are exhausting the soldiers who entered the war early on. Changes to law and policy—including adjusting the minimum and maximum ages, revising medical and physical standards, and imposing harsher punishments for draft evasion—are intended to help fill human

capital requirements. But as Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine continues into its third year, these efforts to create much-needed manpower to sustain a protracted conflict are falling short.¹² This modern conflict makes evident that—despite the pace of technological advancement—war continues to be a fundamentally human endeavor. Therefore, the United States should continue to employ every tool in its arsenal to deter such conflict and ensure U.S. victory if deterrence fails.

This comprehensive study examines how the United States can most effectively strengthen current law, policy, and practice to support the effective mobilization of a draft. The study outlines the state of current U.S. draft mobilization capacity and identifies the areas for improvement and modernization necessary to produce the human capital requirements to win in near-peer competition should deterrence fail.

To inform the analysis of potential impediments to effective U.S. draft mobilization, the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) developed a mixed-methods approach including historical and comparative research; legal and policy reviews; interviews with policymakers, practitioners, and uniformed leaders; surveys of experts regarding their confidence in existing systems and processes; and a tabletop exercise. While this study focused solely on the mobilization of human capital to meet wartime requirements, the research was further informed by the growing body of literature focused on the mobilization capacity of the American defense-industrial base in a near-peer protracted conflict.¹³

The report begins by articulating the intended operational value of draft mobilization. It further outlines the current law, policy, and planning guidance regarding draft mobilization and identifies current challenges and opportunities for modernization. The next section considers current debates regarding a draft within both U.S. historical and international comparative contexts. It draws lessons from the past that may be applicable to the modern U.S. context and provides insights from three past U.S. mobilization exercises conducted since the advent of the AVF—namely Nifty Nugget (1978), Proud Spirit (1980), and Proud Saber (1982). The report then describes insights derived from a draft mobilization tabletop exercise that the CNAS Military, Veterans, and Society team conducted to identify potential challenges that may affect a future draft mobilization. The exercise developed insights for Congress; the Selective Service System (SSS); the Department of Defense (DoD); the military departments; military commanders; the National Security Council; other federal, state, and local agencies; and American society. While the research outlined in sections

DEFINING THE DRAFT

The terms “selective service,” “registration,” “draft,” “induction,” “conscription,” and “mobilization” are frequently conflated with one another in common parlance. Yet important distinctions exist among the terms.

The term **selective service** refers to the process by which a nation can screen citizens into compulsory military service while also ensuring that those individuals meet the selective standards necessary for service. Selective service models contrast with universal conscription models, wherein all (or nearly all) citizens are compelled into military service. The U.S. Selective Service System (SSS) is the government agency responsible for collecting and maintaining the data for all registered men so that when the president and Congress legally enact a draft, the nation can meet the personnel needs of the Department of Defense (DoD) “in a fair and equitable manner.”¹⁴

In the U.S. context, **registration** is the process by which men between the ages of 18–25 provide their personal information to the SSS to be included in the dataset available to federal agencies in the event of a national emergency. In the U.S. SSS, the required information collected during the registration process is the individual’s full name, home address, Social Security number, date of birth, and email address.¹⁵

A **draft** is the legal authorization passed by Congress and signed by the president to extend DoD’s end strength and ensure the military’s “capability to recruit and retain its total force strength.” When a draft is enacted, the president is authorized to induct additional capability into the military services.¹⁶ A new draft would require an update to the Military Selective Service Act.

Induction is the institutional “act of taking a person into any of the Armed Services of the United States without voluntary action on his or her part.” **Conscription** refers to the same process but from the perspective of the individual being inducted by the institution (i.e., the SSS inducts individuals into service; the individual is conscripted into service).¹⁷

Lastly, **mobilization** refers to the “assembling and organizing of national military resources,” including the active component, the reserve component, and/or conscripts “to support a nation’s defense or strategic objectives.”¹⁸ Since 1973, U.S. mobilization efforts have only included the use of active component forces, the activation of reserve component forces, and, in limited cases, the recall of members in the Individual Ready Reserve.¹⁹

one and two provides empirical findings regarding U.S. draft mobilization capability, the exercise builds upon the empirical record to explore the challenges that may be presented in a future draft mobilization. The insights inform actionable preemptive legislative, policy, and procedural recommendations to mitigate those challenges before a draft is required. A key insight from the exercise is that time will be of the essence in a future draft mobilization scenario, and there are predictable factors that may cause delays across the mobilization process that can be addressed now. The report concludes with findings, insights, and recommendations for policymakers, legislators, and uniformed leaders across the national security enterprise.

This report uses the term “the draft” to refer to the legal authorization process whereby Congress and the president call upon the nation’s human capital to meet military requirements to achieve operational victory. Questions surrounding the political feasibility, necessity, utility, legality, and fairness of the draft understandably generate an emotional response from the public, lawmakers, and policymakers. The prospect of draft mobilization also generates anxiety among members of the professionalized AVF who would be charged with training and managing conscripts. Precisely because draft mobilization has the potential to elicit a strong reaction, it is important to clarify what the draft is not intended to accomplish while defining its intended use.

The draft cannot ensure that the U.S. military wins the first battle of the war—but should ensure that it can win the last battle of a protracted war.

Current law allows the SSS 193 days to fully execute a draft, from the moment the updated Military Selective Service Act (MSSA) is signed until the delivery of the first inductees to the military. This means that conscripts will not be readily available to surge military capacity at the onset of a conflict. Moreover, the professional skills and training of the AVF will be critical to succeeding in the first days, weeks, and months of a modern conflict.

The draft is not a tool for meeting peacetime end-strength requirements.

The draft is a legal authorization the president and Congress implement to expand the total force in a national emergency. It is not a tool intended to ensure that the nation can meet steady-state military recruiting requirements.

Recent military recruiting crises have led some commentators and analysts to suggest that a draft is one way to meet end-strength requirements.²⁰ Yet this recommendation reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of statutory force activation options. Total mobilization—another term for draft mobilization—is the most extreme option available to a president and Congress. As discussed in the next section, the president and Congress independently have other options for increasing access to military human capital—including partial and full mobilization of the reserve component—short of total mobilization.

Moreover, draft mobilization has serious implications for the relationship between the government and the American public and should not be easily entertained for any challenge short of an existential threat. Regardless of political affiliation, American values of individualism and personal agency conflict with compulsory service in life-or-death matters. While an existential conflict may require both political leaders and the population to grapple with the necessity of draft mobilization and consider the tradeoffs required for national survival, a draft should only be used as a tool of last resort—not a stopgap effort to meet peacetime requirements.

The draft should not be used primarily to provide a solution to close the civil-military divide or drive democratic accountability.

While an organic and associated benefit of the draft is that it may drive a greater awareness of U.S. use-of-force decisions and distribute the burden of warfare among civilians who otherwise may not engage in issues of national importance, the draft should not be used as a tool to close the civil-military divide.²¹ The U.S. military is a professional force with a mission to meet operational requirements. Even if the president and Congress deem it necessary to rapidly expand the force with conscripts, the end goal is to produce a mixed force capable of defeating the nation's adversaries. If there is a concern that civilians are not adequately invested in personal or societal costs of warfare, either across broader society or within Congress, there are other mechanisms that can close the civil-military divide without detracting from the quality of the force. For example, a historical mechanism used to bridge the civil-military divide is the increase in taxes necessary to fund wars.²²

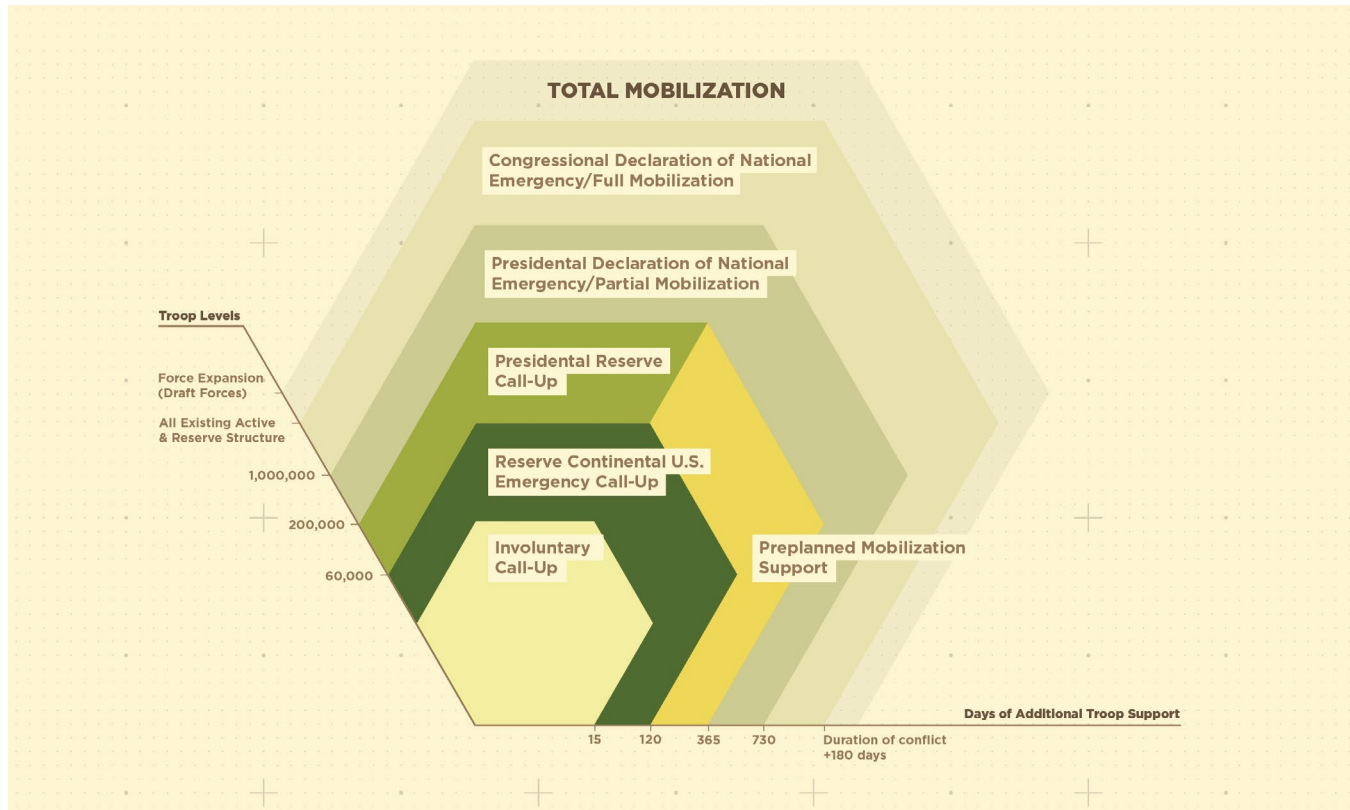
The draft is not a tool solely intended to change social policy—it is a matter of meeting human capital requirements for near-peer conflict.

Current debates surrounding the draft—namely, the debate regarding whether SSS registration and the draft should remain all male, or whether SSS registration should be expanded to all Americans of current registration age (18–25)—tend to center on gender equity arguments. This report sets aside arguments of gender equity and examines potential operational impacts of the current all-male draft, alternative systems, and the impact that legal challenges may have on draft mobilization should one be deemed necessary.

The research and exercise highlight issues of law, policy, and practice that could either degrade the deterrent value of the current draft mobilization process or delay its implementation in a scenario where time will be of the essence. For the draft to meet its intended goals as a deterrent and as a tool to meet human capital requirements in a future war, potential adversaries and the American public alike must view it as credible. For adversaries, that includes clear signaling of the U.S. draft mobilization system strengths, a clear commitment to enact a draft if a scenario calls for it, and the capability to implement the draft if enacted by the president and Congress. For the U.S. domestic audience, a draft must include all the elements necessary to dissuade adversaries—and must further be viewed as equitable by those being drafted and by society writ large.

The draft is not a tool that any American wants to use. However, a strong draft mobilization process ensures U.S. national security by signaling to adversaries that the United States can prevail in protracted conflict—thus deterring initial aggression—and by delivering the capability to defeat an adversary should deterrence fail. The purpose of the draft is to ensure that the DoD can fill a wartime total force, which will exceed the limits of the AVF.

FIGURE 1: LEVELS OF MOBILIZATION OPTIONS



Source: Modified from "Levels of Mobilization," figure I-4 in Joint Mobilization Planning, Joint Publication 4-05, Joint Chiefs of Staff, October 23, 2018, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp4_05.pdf?ver=2018-11-13-170517-383.

LEVELS OF MOBILIZATION OPTIONS

The DoD has tools to rapidly expand its fighting force in a crisis short of a military draft. In the short term, a service secretary can call any reservist on active status into active duty for up to 15 days per year (without the consent of the individuals affected).²³ This surge capacity can provide the human capital necessary to mobilize rapid deployments of active units.

If a service secretary determines that the active component requires augmentation in support of a combatant command's preplanned mission, the service secretary has the authority to order reserve units to active duty for up to 365 consecutive days, so long as no more than 60,000 reservists are called up on active duty.²⁴ If a service secretary activates reserve units under this authority, those reservists do not count against the service's end strength—though they must be accounted for in the service budget.

If the additional 60,000 activated reservists do not meet human capital demands for a crisis, the president can authorize up to 200,000 reservists—including up to 30,000 Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) service

members—to active-duty service for up to 365 days.

The authorization (Title 10, Section 12304) leaves the sole determination for action to the president, without consulting Congress. While a service secretary can activate reservists already serving in units, this authority enables the president to activate reservists not currently serving in units. It further provides the ability to activate members of the IRR—those who have recently left either the active component or the reserve component, but who still have service commitments for their Military Service Obligation. Members of the IRR provide recently trained human capital that can enable the rapid deployment of active forces.

If the president determines that either an additional 200,000 reservists are insufficient for a crisis, or that the crisis is likely to last more than 365 days, the president can declare a national emergency. Once a national emergency is declared, the president is authorized to order up to 1 million reserve members (both those assigned to units and individual members of the ready reserve) to active duty for up to 24 months.²⁵ This process is referred to as partial mobilization.

Congress can also declare a national emergency, enabling full mobilization. Under full mobilization, Congress authorizes a service secretary to order all members of the reserve component to active duty for the duration of a war, and for the six months after the war. Congress further has the right to authorize members of the IRR when the secretary of defense and the service secretary involved assess that the number of active reservists is insufficient.²⁶

If the nature of the crisis is such that all options listed above fail to meet the human capital requirements for a conflict, the president and Congress can pass a draft law. The mechanism for authorizing a draft would be a congressional amendment to the MSSA, which authorizes the president to induct additional human capital into the military services.²⁷

Once a draft is authorized, the SSS is activated. The SSS process itself requires human capital, drawn from reservists and selected military retirees. Area SSS offices would be opened, and staff would begin accepting claims, while members of local boards—who decide the outcomes of exemptions, deferments, and conscientious objector (CO) claims—would also be activated to report for training.

To equitably distribute the demands of draft requirements, a lottery system is used to determine the order in which men report for induction, based on random number assignment associated with birthdays. Under current processes, all men who turn 20 during the year of the draft will be called upon first; additional lotteries are called in order of those who turn 21–25, and then 19-year-olds and 18.5-year-olds.²⁸ The SSS then sends induction notices to registered men as their draft number is selected.

Once an induction notice is sent to those registered with the SSS, registrants can file claims for postponement, deferment, or exemption. If they do not file a claim, they are required to report to their local Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS) for induction and undergo medical and physical fitness exams and moral behavior evaluations for service.

Those who file for exemptions or reclassification as conscientious objectors appear before local and appeals boards for classification. If an individual is exempted from military service as a conscientious objector, they are then evaluated and placed in alternative service for a period of two years.

The responsibility of the SSS is to determine the availability of inductees, while the DoD determines the acceptability of inductees. Once individuals arrive at MEPS, the DoD is responsible for assessment and training. Those who are screened and found fit to serve are assigned to a military service (determined locally by draft boards, who

are assigned specific requirement billets by service as determined by the DoD).

The MSSA requires that all inductees have a minimum of 12 weeks of military training before deployment overseas. Inductees are required to serve for a period of 24 months (including training) unless released from their service earlier by the secretary of defense.

This process provides the nation with multiple avenues to address a growing threat or crisis. Given the authorities that can be executed by the service secretaries, president, or Congress independently, there will likely be signs that the nation is moving toward a draft before an emergency session of Congress is called to revise the MSSA. In light of these probable warning signs, there is an opportunity for policymakers, legislators, and uniformed leadership to consider actions that can be taken and information that should be gathered in the time leading up to a draft to ensure its success and to signal the nation's ability to mobilize human capital in an effort to deter adversarial behavior.

Draft Mobilization Case Studies

While a U.S. draft has not been implemented since the Vietnam War, prior U.S. draft mobilization efforts provide lessons learned regarding challenges and opportunities that may be applicable in a future draft. The conversations raised by draft mobilization were multifaceted and reflected deep divisions in American society, but also offered common ground to ideologies that often found themselves in opposition to each other. Comparative case studies examining all-volunteer, universal conscription, and selective service models illustrate the tradeoffs for both combat effectiveness and civil-military relations across allied, partnered, and adversarial militaries.

Historical Case Studies

Many challenges associated with a future draft mobilization have historical precedents that the nation navigated, even if imperfectly. Tensions between those who advocated for U.S. engagement in international conflicts (necessitating conscription) and those who advocated for isolationism are consistent throughout U.S. history, including during World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. Similarly, concerns over unequal distributions of the draft across class and racial lines are consistent across conflicts. The nation now has the advantage of considering how best to preemptively address and, where necessary, correct the potential for inequitable distribution of conscription.

WORLD WAR I

World War I raised fundamental questions of whether the United States should be engaged in an international conflict and, if so, what the commitment would require of American service members. Early in the war, Americans could not even agree on which European side to support—selling supplies, equipment, and sometimes munitions to both. President Woodrow Wilson maintained his opposition to expansionism and universal conscription throughout his first term in office. But the sinking of the RMS *Lusitania* in 1915 shifted American opinion away from isolation and landed Americans squarely on the side of the Allies in the conflict.²⁹ German military interference in American passenger and mercantile shipping served as a turning point for many isolationists in the United States. It was clear that the U.S. Army's approximately 107,000 soldiers would not be sufficient to fight the war and that a draft would be needed.³⁰ Wilson turned to the Army judge advocate general and provost marshal, then–lieutenant general Enoch Crowder, to rapidly expand the American force. Crowder was a longtime scholar of the Civil War draft and became the principal architect of the Selective Service System that still exists in large parts today.³¹

The bill Crowder constructed sought authorization from Congress to conscript 500,000 men ages 19–25, with the possibility to expand to 1 million conscripts if necessary. Crowder identified this specific age range as ideal for military service: young men tend to be more physically fit than older men; they are less likely to be married or have children, decreasing the number of dependent deferments; and they are less likely to possess critical skills that would make them irreplaceable in the workforce, thereby lessening the impact on the national economy. Congress opposed this proposal and argued that men under 21 years old were too young to be forced to go to war. At the time, those under the age of 21 fell below the age of majority in several states.³²

The Selective Service Act, passed by Congress on May 18, 1917, was the Wilson administration's attempt to thread the needle among several contradictory positions in a way that allowed each side to feel vindicated. Registration would be universal for all men ages 21–30.³³ On June 5, 1917, the first registration date, 9.6 million men lined up to be registered for the draft. However, not every young man complied. Of the approximately 24 million men who were required to register with Selective Service over the course of the war, it is estimated as many as 3.6 million (15 percent) failed to register. An additional 338,000 deserted after reaching basic training, accounting for 12 percent of all draftees during World War I.³⁴

In order to execute the draft, each registrant was given a number based on the order in which he had registered, and selection was based on a lottery system. The Selective Service Act authorized an increase of 1.5 million draftees into the military. States were given quotas of conscripts to fill based on their population, adjusted for the number of volunteers from that state.³⁵ The first draft lottery number was pulled on July 20, 1917, by Secretary of War Newton D. Baker.³⁶ The first conscripts began shipping out to basic training just five days later.³⁷

The argument for a peacetime draft was to allow the military to prepare to respond to a contingency in the critical first hours after any declaration of war by Congress.

Conscription was intentionally selective: not only did the military need individual men who had the capabilities necessary for military service, but it was just as critical that the American economy maintain sufficient labor to meet wartime needs. American leaders witnessed the effects of voluntary mobilization on the United Kingdom (UK), leading to severe labor shortages at the beginning of the war. The need for a selective mobilization effort was communicated to the American public, with messaging aimed to ensure every man was doing his part to contribute to the war effort both at home and abroad. The effort further communicated that the federal government was the best entity to coordinate this whole-of-nation effort. To this end, the military services ceased accepting volunteers and resorted fully to conscription on December 15, 1917.³⁸ In an attempt to ensure fairness across labor sectors, there were no blanket exemptions from service for agricultural workers, industrial workers, or university students. Only ordained clergy and divinity students and sitting government and judicial officials received default occupational exemptions.³⁹

In previous American conflicts, conscripts were organized into units based on their place of origin. However, during World War I, conscripts were no longer organized into units on this basis. The change was significant in that it increased federal authority over the states and influenced the formation of a cohesive American identity (rather than an identity rooted in home state) among service members. This collective national identity became especially valuable in a world of coalition warfighting.

However, the nascent Selective Service System did not have the staffing capacity to enforce or adjudicate claims across the country. More importantly, at the time, local community organization was essential for mobilizing suburban and rural communities. It became clear that it would be difficult to generate political buy-in for conscription without establishing local nodes. Local boards, while technically comprising presidential appointees, were selected by state governors and approved by the president.⁴⁰ The use of both state and local boards allowed state governments to retain some power in the conscription processes but also had the effect of creating self-reinforcing groups of local elites rather than more egalitarian representations of local interest groups.⁴¹

Local board appointments were voluntary and unpaid and were established at an approximate ratio of one board per every 30,000 people.⁴² Among their responsibilities, the three-person boards adjudicated deferment and exemption claims. Deferments were granted to individuals deemed essential to the military industrial base and the local economy.⁴³ In practice, those with dependents, especially fathers of young children, were also often deferred, though the legislation passed in May 1917 did not make specific allowance for them.⁴⁴ As a result, the first wave of draftees pulled heavily from dependent-free laborers, leaving many industries, especially agriculture, short-staffed during the harvest season. Additionally, only roughly half of the conscripts sent for induction by the local boards were fit to serve.⁴⁵ To address this and other hurdles, the Selective Service System sent additional guidance to draft boards in September 1918, instructing the boards to categorize every registrant who received a draft notice in terms of fitness for service; this included basic medical screenings. There were five categories: Class I included those fit for immediate service (physically/mentally fit, unmarried, unskilled laborers) and Class V included those fully exempted from service by virtue of law (such as clergy) or permanent disability. Classes II, III, and IV placed those deferred or exempted by circumstance (such as dependence) in descending order of call-up should individuals in Class I be exhausted.⁴⁶

Local boards also handled conscientious objector claims. Framers of the 1917 draft legislation were primarily concerned with projecting the legitimacy of conscription to the American people. A significant part of this rested with ensuring that the draft was fair and equitable despite being selective. To this end, they were explicit in exempting as few categories of people as possible and this included most instances of conscientious objection. Legally, exemptions from combat,

but not service, were made for members of traditional peace churches such as the Quakers or the Mennonites. However, the specific churches considered to qualify were not enumerated in either the legislation or in policy guidance given to the boards. As a result, approval of conscientious objector status was difficult to obtain and depended heavily upon the discretion of the individual board.⁴⁷

As the war progressed, additional call-ups were required. In August 1918, the age pool of those eligible for the draft was expanded to include all men aged 18–45, and an additional registration day was held for those being added.⁴⁸ Additionally, men who turned 21 after the initial registration day on June 5, 1917, had to register for conscription. World War I saw three separate lottery draws for conscripts. Of the 4 million U.S. troops who served in World War I, 2.8 million were conscripts.⁴⁹ When the war ended on November 11, 1918, so too did the authorizations of the Selective Service Act and the Selective Service System.⁵⁰

WORLD WAR II

Immediately prior to World War II, the U.S. Army had fewer than 190,000 troops.⁵¹ These troops were understaffed and underfunded; they had spent the preceding seven years managing civilian workers rather than engaging in traditional drill and maneuver training. However, given their experience during the interwar period, they had ample practice in expansion, mobilization, and the management of untrained civilians that produced a solid framework of professional soldiers from which to expand.

The rising generation of young adults was especially critical of the idea of joining the war in Europe. A Gallup poll released in June 1939 claimed that as much as 97 percent of American college students would claim conscientious objector status if conscription was reintroduced.⁵² Antiwar student groups, such as Princeton's Veterans of Future Wars, spread across university campuses in the mid-1930s, supported by public figures, including First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. However, groups like this sparked anger among other isolationists, particularly among veterans and anticommunist conservative legislators, when the groups would go so far as to demand billions of dollars so these "future veterans" could enjoy their combat bonuses while they were alive to use them. Despite seemingly sharing an end goal, older generations of isolationists saw the youth movements as disrespectful to those who had died in the First World War and unpatriotic for refusing to serve as their parents' generation had.⁵³

Debates on enacting a draft centered on two main points: the age group to which conscription would apply and how long conscripts would be mandated to serve. As in World War I, many members of Congress pushed back against the inclusion of men ages 20 and below. The military argued that since 18-year-olds were permitted to volunteer, men of the same age should be included in the draft. Additionally, the military sought 18-month terms of service. One year, it argued, was too short a time to fully train and staff deficient units; as soon as a cohort of recruits was adequately trained and familiar with their duties, their service term would expire and a fresh, green cohort would replace them.⁵⁴

Congress passed the Selective Training and Service Act on September 16, 1940, declaring the first peacetime draft in American history. The United States benefited from the recent experience of constructing a draft system. As a result, the 1940 legislation was remarkably similar, though more refined, than its 1917 predecessor. The peacetime draft called for all men ages 21–35 to register for conscription and authorized the military to conscript up to 900,000 troops in peacetime, who could not serve outside the United States (inclusive of its territories and possessions).⁵⁵ The 1940 bill required one year of active training and service from conscripts, at which point they were transferred to the Reserves for a period of 10 years or until they reached 45 years of age.⁵⁶

The bill reestablished the Selective Service System. The SSS relied upon decentralized local draft boards to conduct adjudications on deferments and exemptions. The deferments enumerated in 1940 differed in several significant ways from 1917. Most notably, the 1940 legislation provided for the deferment of university students registered in a degree program for the 1940–41 school year: they could elect to defer their enlistment until the end of the current school year.⁵⁷

The peacetime draft allowed the SSS to address shortfalls in force mobilization projections. As part of the induction process, draftees were to receive two physical exams—one before their local board and the second upon arriving for processing at basic training—which, in theory, tested for the same standard set by the services. Military planners predicted that only 2 percent of inductees who made it to basic training would fail the secondary screening. The actual number was 15 percent. Between the local board exam and the military exam, more than 50 percent of those who received notices were deferred for just physical health. As a result, some standards, especially those around dental health, were changed before the United States even joined the war.⁵⁸

Finally, the 1940 act provided explicit exemptions for conscientious objectors by nature of religious training and belief, a significant change from the World War I legislation, which allowed for conscientious objectors only from historical peace churches. While the 1940 act still did not provide an avenue for nonreligious CO status, in practice, conscripts from several philosophical and political backgrounds attained CO status from their local boards.⁵⁹ The bill called for allowance of noncombat military service or an alternative civilian service doing work of national importance.

Early objectors were given work in forestry and conservation. However, some COs sought work that would put them at similar risk or require similar sacrifice to combatant conscripts and to prove to their communities that objection was not the same as cowardice. These men took work as wildfire fighters and volunteered for dangerous medical studies at great personal risk.⁶⁰ Despite completing the same terms of service as nonobjector conscripts, COs were almost completely uncompensated, including being denied disability benefits for injuries resulting from their service.⁶¹

The argument for a peacetime draft was to allow the military to prepare to respond to a contingency in the critical first hours after any declaration of war by Congress. As in World War I, there was a sense that the United States' involvement was a matter of when, not if. Implementing a peacetime draft also had the effect of increasing draft-motivated volunteerism, which allowed enlistees greater agency in their branch and form of service in exchange for a slightly longer tour of duty.⁶² Under generals George C. Marshall and Lewis B. Hershey, the U.S. Army expanded from 190,000 troops in September 1939 to 1.5 million in December 1941.⁶³

When Congress declared war on December 8, 1941, in response to the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, the military and American society was prepared to adjust to total mobilization. Congress granted amendments to the draft legislation with little resistance. The amendments extended the length of service to six months past the end of the war, allowed for draftees to be deployed outside the United States, and set the minimum age for conscription to 20 years old. The SSS adjusted the deferment policy to place inductees over 28 years old in lower classification tiers.⁶⁴

The two years of debate and the 14 months of peacetime conscription provided an opportunity to solicit and incorporate public feedback, leading to overwhelming popular support for U.S. participation in World War II and for the conscription process. Polling from late 1940 reported that the public's opinion of the fairness of the

draft was more than 90 percent favorable.⁶⁵ Over the course of the war, 10 million men were drafted, and yet public support remained over 75 percent.⁶⁶ The positive response was due in large part to the central role played by local boards. While deferment decisions were inherently subjective, by designing the draft system with local touch points from registration to induction, the SSS's framers built in the flexibility to respond to local politics and economies as a feature that gave the American people a sense of agency in a federal process.

Over the course of the war, several notable amendments were made to the Selective Service and Training Act. First, Congress extended the period of service for conscripts to six months after the end of the war or until dismissed. This was accompanied by the removal of the prohibition on conscripts serving outside of the United States. The age pool eligible for the draft changed several times. In December 1941 it was first lowered to include 20-year-olds.⁶⁷ The following June, the age floor was again lowered, this time to 18.⁶⁸ Six months later, in December 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt exempted men over 38 from the draft, as the military found that men over the age of 26 “were almost useless” because they failed the physical exam at a much higher rate than 18- to 25-year-olds.⁶⁹

The introduction of younger men to the draft pool raised new dilemmas for draft boards regarding who should be deferred. Some board members were still of the opinion that 18- and 19-year-olds were too emotionally immature to be sent to war.⁷⁰ On the other hand, married men often received preference for deferment. As the war progressed, however, both married men and young men were needed to make draft quotas. Marriage was no longer a shield from conscription, especially if the couple did not have children or the wife was able to support the family. By 1943, the Selective Service System asked local boards to select married men in nonessential jobs, regardless of dependency status, before single men in critical fields such as agriculture. Despite the policy, boards seldom complied.⁷¹ The very purpose of the boards was to allow for the influence of local values to have a voice in a federal process. By declining to draft fathers, boards made Americans' value of the nuclear family unit clear. Due to the decentralized nature of the conscription system, there was little the Selective Service System could do to compel board behavior.

For the United States, World War II ended in September 1945 with the surrender of Imperial Japan. However, the Selective Service and Training Act remained in force until 1947. When Harry Truman

became president, he extended the draft a year from May 1945.⁷² While both Truman and his new chief of staff of the Army, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, both supported some form of universal military training to ensure that the United States could support its security commitments in the wake of the war, the American people and Congress were only slightly more receptive to the idea than they had been before the war. Ultimately, Congress approved a one-year extension to the draft but reset the conscriptable population to men ages 19–34, hindering the number of effective conscripts that could be inducted.⁷³ The Selective Service and Training Act was allowed to sunset in 1947, but leaders in the executive branch and the military services still believed in both the need for a peacetime draft to secure U.S. national security interests abroad, and universal military training at home.⁷⁴

THE COLD WAR

In the face of rapid demobilization and low unemployment, the volunteer military of 1947 struggled to maintain 500,000 active-duty troops.⁷⁵ As tensions with the Soviet Union rose through 1947 and into 1948, Truman returned to Congress to ask to resume conscription to meet the rising challenge. With 63 percent of Americans favoring conscription, Congress passed the Selective Service Act of 1948. The legislation was once again remarkably similar to the previous draft bills; it reestablished a languishing Selective Service System and relied upon decentralized boards to adjudicate deferment decisions. Once again, no blanket deferments were offered to specific groups, but students were allowed to defer service to the end of the academic year. The most notable change from the World War II legislation was that the population required to register was set from the start to men ages 18–25, though only 19–25-year-olds could be conscripted.⁷⁶

In the first two years of this new draft, the military inducted only 30,000 men.⁷⁷ When North Korea crossed the 38th parallel in June 1950 and Truman announced the United States' support for South Korea, a new era of military manpower emerged. The Korean War marked both the first use of conscription in a limited wartime scenario but also the shift in U.S. policy toward conscription as a deviation from the status quo to the new norm. While 1.53 million conscripted troops served in the Korean War, the number of conscripts was much lower than during the world wars.⁷⁸ There was, thus, less need to insulate the U.S. economy from disruption by conscription.

As a result, boards were able to grant deferment requests more liberally. The inductee classification system was again expanded; now fully eight of the 16 classification categories were dedicated to those deferred or exempted due solely to dependency or occupation (i.e., excluding failure to meet physical/mental standards or exempted due to current service in the military or reserves).⁷⁹ Deferment debates in the 1950s centered largely on the status of students. While the legislation itself provided for the deferment of students to the end of the academic year, universities, their students, and the broader scientific community across the country pushed continuously, and unsuccessfully, for a blanket deferment for students.⁸⁰

The compromise that Truman and Hershey (still head of the Selective Service System) made was to allow the top academic performers to defer service beyond the end of their current term. To determine this, Hershey commissioned the creation of a standardized test that all conscripts wishing to claim deferment for student status would take. Achieving a minimum score on the test or remaining among the top of their classes would exempt them from conscription until the end of their program. In the first year it was offered, 80 percent of registered college students took the test. However, 90 percent of students believe they would still have to serve once they graduated, and as much as 75 percent at the time viewed military service as a duty of citizenship.⁸¹

With the end of U.S. involvement in the Korean War in 1953, the urgent need for inductees lessened. The late 1950s and early 1960s also saw the generation born during World War II turning 18 and becoming eligible for drafting. The baby boom that followed World War II also required a larger civilian workforce to sustain it—from teachers to structural engineers to nuclear physicists, the growing society needed people pursuing university educations as much as it needed soldiers. As a result, the rate of deferments for student status rose sharply in the decade after the Korean War. Unlike during the war, however, there was not the same expectation that students would need to complete their military service after graduation, as those men classified as 1-A (available for immediate military service) numbered enough to sustain the military force structure in the absence of active war.⁸²

An additional impact of the oversupply of draft-age men was that because fewer of them were needed to fill the draft quotas, the conscription system (which defined itself as being as egalitarian as possible) became far more sporadic in its application. Fewer people were classified as 1-A, and those who were classified as 1-A

bore the full responsibility of citizenship that should, by design, have applied to all American men. This changed the perception of the draft in the eyes of many Americans from a duty to be served into a burden to be avoided. However, contrary to congressional policy during the World Wars, there was little interest on Capitol Hill in doing away with the draft during a time of ever-increasing threats from the Soviet Union.⁸³

THE VIETNAM WAR

Growing resistance to the egalitarian ideal of the conscription system contributed to popular defiance of the draft in Vietnam. Rather than being seen as an equal duty applied to all citizens, military service—and the draft in particular—was often viewed as a choice for the middle class, who could afford to send their sons to college, but a requirement for those of the poor and working class who could not benefit from the plentiful deferments for students and critical industries.⁸⁴

Moreover, the increased deferment policies created unrealistic expectations of conscription during wartime and further left men, even those previously deferred, in limbo for years.

By committing to a policy centered on deferments, Hershey and the Selective Service System set an expectation that deferments would be honored. When the United States committed combat troops to the Vietnam War and needed to mobilize rapidly, the sudden perceived change in policy was met with resistance. The terms of the deal between government and draftee had changed in the decade of relative peace since the end of the Korean War.

In part, the change was due to government efforts to use social programs to increase the available pool of 1-A draftees by addressing the causes of physical deferments such as health and fitness standards. One such program was Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's Project 100,000, which sought to educate men—many of them from poorer communities or racial minorities who did not finish high school—who failed the mental acuity test but were otherwise fit for service.⁸⁵

Additionally, the continual uncertainty of if or when men might be called up for service left them anxious about committing to families or careers from which they might be taken away. To relieve the uncertainty, men could enlist in the military in a limited capacity. Draft-motivated volunteerism had existed throughout conscription's use in America but became particularly prevalent during the Vietnam War. At the beginning of the war, the Lyndon B. Johnson administration was hesitant to pull in the Reserves and National Guard, who were often more integrated with the local communities. By not

ending voluntary enlistment, particularly in the Reserves or the National Guard, these organizations became a landing space for those who sought to escape conscription and the war as a whole. Additionally, the policy choice to exclude the reserve components specifically undermined the original purpose of the Selective Service: to maintain a sustainable source of military troops while maintaining the domestic economy.

Historical Takeaways for Modern War

While future conflicts may pose different requirements from those listed in the historical case studies considered above, the U.S. experience with draft mobilization provides instructive elements that should be considered by the president, Congress, and military leadership. While this report does not advocate for a peacetime draft as in the World War II case, it is worth considering the advantages of long-term public engagement regarding what would be expected in a future scenario that might call for a peacetime draft. While difficult, public engagement on the topic would aid in socializing the requirements and building support. Further, public discourse about the potential for a draft could generate considerations (of such things as age ranges or reasons for exemption) that ultimately could result in a sense of agency among the American public.

Moreover, while the foundation of the Military Selective Service Act heavily reflects processes determined more than a century ago, that does not necessarily mean that the law is outdated. The previous laws provide a strong starting point upon which the nation can build in the event of a future crisis.

International Comparative Case Studies

During the conflicts of the 20th century many countries resorted to conscripting forces, but a majority suspended their conscription policies at the end of World War II or the Cold War. Today, only a handful of countries still actively implement conscription to staff their militaries on a consistent basis. While the United States relies on its professionalized AVF for steady-state operations, other military human capital models provide insights for U.S. policymakers and legislators to consider in the event of a crisis requiring rapid military expansion.

ALL-VOLUNTEER FORCES

Over the past 150 years, many of the United States' closest allies, including the United Kingdom and Canada, have shared similar histories of conscription. Like the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada currently maintain all-volunteer militaries. Neither country currently has legislation in place allowing for conscription or

similar rapid defense mobilization. All three faced similar hurdles in domestic opposition to conscription, especially regarding geographic and ethnic representation. In Canada, tensions sparked between Anglophone and Francophone sectors of society.⁸⁶ For the United Kingdom, the harshest resistance came from Ireland, which was at the turn of the 20th century still entirely under UK rule.⁸⁷

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, conversations arose within UK military leadership about the necessity of mobilization capabilities. On January 24, 2024, General Patrick Saunders, the chief of the general staff, said that the United Kingdom would require a "citizen army" in a hypothetical war with Russia, calling on the current "pre-war generation" of UK citizens to begin preparing.⁸⁸ The comments, while quickly walked back by the government, made headlines across the United Kingdom.

On the European continent, Germany maintained a conscription system until 2011, and even now the German constitution maintains the ability to conscript men over the age of 18.⁸⁹ On March 12, 2024, the parliamentary commissioner for the armed forces, Eva Högl, called for renewed debates on reinstituting conscription in Germany, hoping to have a new system in place as early as 2025. Boris Pistorius, the minister of defense, requested that plans for such a system be presented to him by April 1, 2024.⁹⁰

A notable feature of the German system was the incorporation of community service, *Zivildienst*, as an alternative to military service. While the existence of a parallel civic service is a part of most modern conscription systems, several sectors, such as elderly care, had grown to rely on the labor it provided. The *Zivildienst* regularly provided as many as 90,000 individuals at any given time to support essential community services.⁹¹ Now, more than a decade since Germany ended conscription, fields that previously relied upon the *Zivildienst* are struggling to maintain similar staffing capacity. There have been discussions about reinstating conscription both to revive the *Zivildienst* and to rekindle a sense of civic duty among teens and young adults.⁹²

UNIVERSAL CONSCRIPTION MODELS

Unlike the United Kingdom and Germany, European countries bordering Russia with complex histories of invasion construct their defense forces differently. Finland and Norway both employ universal conscription models, though their approaches are quite different from each other.

In Finland, all men are obligated to undergo military training by the time they are 29 years old. At age 18, men in Finland undergo physical and mental fitness screenings and share their preferences for service branch and duty. Their active service only lasts from 165 to 347 days, but Finnish men remain in the reserves and receive additional

refresher training until age 60.⁹³ Finnish conscription is unique given how well the Finns integrate conscript preferences and work to adapt military training and service to younger generations using more modern teaching practices. As a result, conscription is relatively popular in Finland; in 2022, 84 percent of Finns supported conscription.⁹⁴ Additionally, Finnish men living abroad return annually to complete their military service, including notable figures such as athletes who take leave from their professional teams to fulfill their obligations.⁹⁵ The Finnish military is structured around the annual influx of new conscripts maintained by a smaller cadre of professional enlisted service members and officers.

In Norway, while conscription is technically universal for all 19-year-olds, there are more citizens who come of age every year than the military needs to function in peacetime. Consequently, though all are obligated to undergo fitness and aptitude examinations, only about 15 percent of each age cohort are inducted for service.⁹⁶ In 2023, there were more than 64,000 19-year-olds in Norway.⁹⁷ However, only 9,840 were selected for induction (approximately 15.3 percent).⁹⁸ Competition for selection, especially among specialized billets, is fierce, leading some teens to undertake dedicated study and fitness training to prepare.⁹⁹ Conscripts typically serve 12 months on active duty before transferring to the reserves or opting to become a professional, which about a quarter do.¹⁰⁰ Despite having universal conscription, Norway also enjoys one of the major benefits of a volunteer force, in that the prestige accorded to its conscripts further ensures that the country can make use of its best and brightest in the military. Additionally, Norway is one of the few countries that extends conscription to women; 36 percent of conscripts in 2023 were women.¹⁰¹

Outside of Europe, South Korea and Israel provide well-known examples of universal conscription. While they share common aspects with the nations described above, each country has characteristics that offer compelling points of contrast. In South Korea, compulsory military service lasts for a period of 18 to 21 months before conscripts are placed in the reserves, where they are required to undergo annual training for several years.¹⁰² The longer term of service allows conscripts to better integrate with the professional force and receive more practical training at a level that would be expected of them should they be recalled in a time of crisis.

The South Korean system is notable with respect to the stringent standards the nation sets for conscientious objectors. Until just a few years ago, men who refused to serve in the army had no alternative pathways to service and were subject to imprisonment—but in 2018, the Constitutional Court mandated that the military

introduce an alternative service program for conscientious objectors.¹⁰³ The strict nature of compulsory service in South Korea, however, continues, with most conscientious objectors completing their service working in prisons, and for a longer time than those who serve in the military. Conscientious objection also has a high threshold to prove sincerity. Objectors' entire lives are examined for evidence of contradiction; something as innocuous as playing a violent video game can disqualify a candidate from CO status. Most COs in South Korea are Jehovah's Witnesses; more than 19,000 were jailed for refusing the draft between the introduction of conscription in 1953 and the implementation of the alternative service program in 2020.¹⁰⁴

Israel offers another unique example of universal conscription. Like Norway, Israel mandates conscription for both men and women. Israel's conscription system was developed to make the best use of all conscripts rather than selecting among the most qualified. The Israelis have found ways to include individuals with conditions who might be deferred or exempted in other systems. For instance, while individuals with autism or other neurodivergences may face challenges enlisting in the U.S. military, the Israeli military harnesses their strengths of pattern recognition in the field of intelligence.¹⁰⁵

Like South Korea, Israel has a strict process for conscientious objectors. Israel allows for some exemptions to conscription for those pursuing religious study (*yeshiva*) and some for religious and ethnic subgroups within Israel,¹⁰⁶ and provides an alternate civilian service (*Sherut Leumi*).¹⁰⁷ However, the process for claiming nonreligious conscientious objection to all military service is laborious and often involves multiple rounds of questioning before a committee—and even brief prison sentences of 10 to 21 days—to test the CO's sincerity before the claimant is ultimately exempted, inducted, or imprisoned.

Conscripts in Israel serve in the active military or the *Sherut Leumi* for at least two years—24 months for women and 32 months for men—before being transferred to the reserves until ages 50 and 55, respectively.¹⁰⁸ Immediately after the attacks by Hamas in October 2023, Israel mobilized 360,000 reservists.¹⁰⁹ In the aftermath of the attacks when popular support for the invasion of Gaza was high, those who refused to comply with conscription or respond to reserve call-ups were punished. One reservist was fired for privately criticizing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.¹¹⁰ A growing number of Israeli youths are refusing to acquiesce to conscription laws. These teenage refuseniks formed a collective social movement, *Mesarovot* ("We Refuse" in Hebrew), aimed at providing resources and solidarity for those who refuse, or are planning to refuse, to serve in the Israel Defense Forces in any capacity. Despite the shift in the sociopolitical landscape

after the October 7 attacks and subsequent mobilization, members of Mesarvot are stalwart in their opposition to military service.¹¹¹

CONSCRIPTION IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 highlighted the possibility that nations may need to mobilize their populations quickly. The resulting conflict has given military leaders, policymakers, and scholars insights into traditional warfare in the modern context and a case study of how conscription may operate in practice.

Ukraine employed conscription beginning with its independence in 1991 and continued until 2013, when it transitioned to an all-volunteer force. This effort was short-lived; after the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Ukrainian government reinstituted limited conscription to respond to the threat.¹¹² Over the next two years, men who had previously served in the reserves were immediately called up in six waves. Additionally, the Ukrainian government mandated 18–24 months of training and service for young men, though deferments could be obtained for fathers and those pursuing university degrees. In the following eight years, Ukraine managed to completely reshape its military in the face of the encroaching threat from Russia.¹¹³

While Ukrainian policymakers intended to return to a volunteer force, the circumstances changed when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of the country on February 24, 2022. Ukraine instituted martial law and barred all men ages 18–60 from leaving the country. Moreover, most deferments ceased as Ukraine began a mass mobilization of forces.¹¹⁴ In the first few months, as the Ukrainian army managed to repel the substantially larger Russia force, morale was high and volunteers were plentiful; in the first year of the war more than 28,000 people joined the Ukrainian National Guard's Offensive Guard assault brigades.¹¹⁵ However, as combat slogged on and the front ground to a halt, fewer people signed up to fight. As of November 2023, Ukrainian authorities had captured more than 21,000 men trying to flee the country to avoid conscription; another 19,000 succeeding in illegally crossing the borders into neighboring countries.¹¹⁶ Some who remained paid tens of thousands of dollars for help avoiding the draft or for forged exemption papers. Some refused to leave their houses for fear of being pressed into service by military recruiters.¹¹⁷ While Ukraine legally ensures an alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors, such opportunities proved difficult to obtain in the face of an existential threat to the nation. Approximately a dozen men have been put on

trial for refusing to serve.¹¹⁸ As Ukraine faces a dwindling pool of willing and/or able men to serve on the front lines, its leaders continue to look for ways to generate more human capital.

Russia faces a similar manpower crisis. While all Russian men 18–27 are liable for one year of conscripted service in the military, their induction is dependent upon call-up from the president.¹¹⁹ When Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, many of the existing forces were poorly trained, poorly equipped conscripts. By Russian law, under normal circumstances conscripts must receive four months of training before being allowed to deploy into conflict scenarios.¹²⁰ At the time, Russian President Vladimir Putin was characterizing the invasion as a “special military operation,” and claimed no conscripts were involved. Russian officials did not admit to using conscripts in Ukraine until March 9, 2022.¹²¹ Conscript inductions occur twice a year in Russia—October through December and April through July. By the time troops began to amass on the Russian border with Ukraine, few of the conscripts from the fall cohort would have received the minimum amount of training for combat, and they certainly would have gotten less than was needed to be effective in combat.¹²² As casualties mounted, new conscripts were sent to the front lines with even less training, leaving them unable to comprehend basic tactical commands. Additionally, some conscripts were armed with Mosin-Nagant rifles,¹²³ which Russian troops used previously from their introduction in 1892 until they were phased out in 1963.¹²⁴

It was quickly obvious that while Russia may have a numerical advantage over Ukraine, the Ukrainian army was galvanized whereas the Russians were demoralized.¹²⁵ Such morale issues—referred to in the literature as “will to fight”—are often overlooked in broader net assessments of predicted outcomes but are critical to discussions of operational performance on the battlefield. As the conflict persisted longer than Russia imagined, Putin was faced with a requirement for additional troops. To meet these requirements, he took several steps. He increased the draft pool to include men up to and including age 30,¹²⁶ relying heavily on conscripts from eastern and rural areas of Russia to a greater extent than those from his political footholds in urban centers in the west.¹²⁷ Russia also began recruiting from prisons, offering pardons in exchange for combat service.¹²⁸ New conscript troops in Russia are still receiving minimal training before being sent to fight, and morale remains low. In addition to the increase in conscripts, Putin further augmented manpower requirements with forces from the paramilitary Wagner Group.¹²⁹

COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES OF MOBILIZATION MODELS

Strong similarities exist among countries that utilize universal conscription systems. First, many are geographically near an adversarial power or powers posing an existential threat, and have historically been invaded or occupied by those powers. Second, the populations of these countries overwhelmingly believe that deferments and exemptions are adjudicated fairly and not subject to corruption. The domestic credibility of universal conscription systems relies on impartial and unbiased application. Moreover, when universal conscription applies to a broader segment of society, the military is more reflective of the society from which it is drawn.

Employment Prospects

Conscription imposes an individual cost with respect to delayed civilian employment opportunities. But the social desirability of military experience among a nation's civilian employers can also positively affect a conscript's future opportunities. In the cases of Finland and Israel, the shared conscription experience provides a consistent understanding of the value of military service. In Norway—where being selected for conscription is seen as an achievement—conscripted service is viewed as a preferred indicator for employment.

Noncombat Alternatives

Countries with universal conscription policies may provide alternative and noncombat service programs, but the terms of those vary across countries. In Germany, the *Zivildienst* provided significant portions of the workforce in such places as nursing homes. In 2011, the year Germany ended conscription, one charity that provided support for individuals living with dementia expected that without *Zivildienst* workers, who were paid by the government, the charity would have only 35 percent of the aides it normally relied on.¹³⁰ In South Korea, satisfying the requirements of its conscientious objector policies is difficult and time-consuming. Moreover, the societal norm regarding universal male conscription can complicate future employment opportunities and career progression for those who object to service.

Administrative Costs

While conscription systems persist internationally, it is difficult for most states to justify the cost and administrative labor necessary to continuously field a conscript force in times of peace, as in Germany's case. Once the decision to transition to an all-volunteer force is made, building the political and popular will to reinstate a conscription system is often incredibly difficult.

Geography & Society

All-volunteer military systems are often favored by countries that benefit from significant geographical distance from adversarial nations. The United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and, to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom (UK) and Japan, are all insulated from immediate threats of invasion by large bodies of water. All-volunteer forces may also be favored in nations with ethnically or religiously heterogeneous citizenries. For instance, Canada faced significant resistance to implementing conscription in World Wars I and II from the Francophone sectors of Canadian society. It can be difficult to build consensus among strongly opinionated or influential groups, especially in liberal societies, which can experience frequent changes to the dominant domestic political party. Liberal societies are also more likely to value independence and self-determination as social mores, sometimes at the expense of communal defense and civic responsibility.

Recruitment & Retention

Nations with all-volunteer military forces must compete with the civilian labor market for skilled workers. To appeal to potential recruits, volunteer forces must provide benefits not available to civilians. These can take the form of tangible benefits (such as monetary compensation, access to health care, or education) or they can be intangible (a sense of fulfilled duty, an ethos of service, or the opportunity to participate in experiences unattainable outside of military contexts, such as being a fighter pilot). Depending on the conditions of the civilian labor market, recruiting to all-volunteer forces can face challenges, contributing to the military recruiting crises that the U.S. and UK militaries are currently encountering.

Culture

Finally, due to the self-selecting nature of voluntary service, all-volunteer forces can risk becoming siloed from the society they serve. In countries such as Finland where every man is obligated to serve in the military, civilian points of contact with the military are everywhere. By necessity, universal conscription systems draw from all sectors of society, ensuring an accurate representation of the members of that society but also allowing for an influx of diverse ideas and perspectives. In long-standing all-volunteer models, military service can more easily become divorced from the duty of citizenship.

Past Efforts to Modernize and Stress Test U.S. Draft Mobilization

While the United States has not fully tested mobilization systems since the advent of the AVF in 1973, the Department of Defense has run notable exercises that revealed potential gaps and strengths of U.S. mobilization capacity.

Just five years into the all-volunteer force, leaders within the DoD sought to stress test the nation's ability to mobilize under the adolescent Total Force policy. From 1978 to 1983, the U.S. government conducted three sets of exercises designed to simulate mobilization for a short-notice, large-scale combat scenario. The results were startling and resulted in major changes to force structure that shaped the following 40 years of the AVF.

Nifty Nugget

The first set of mobilization exercises took place in October 1978. The exercises—Petite Nugget, Nifty Nugget, and Readiness Exercise 78 (REX78)—all operated under the same scenario, which postulated a short-warning attack on NATO forces in Europe by the Warsaw Pact requiring full, rapid mobilization of the U.S. military. Petite Nugget was a single-day exercise consisting of a four-hour discussion among senior DoD civilian and uniformed leaders examining pre-mobilization readiness factors that could influence the effectiveness of force mobilization. Such factors included awareness of heightening tensions internationally, domestic political pressures, and the likelihood of cooperation from private industry in preconflict buildup.¹³¹

The Nifty Nugget and REX78 exercises took place over 20 days in October 1978 and involved more than 2,000 people from the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), the four military services and the Coast Guard, eight unified commands, 11 federal departments, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Selective Service System, and more than 20 other agencies from across DoD and the executive branch.¹³² The Nifty Nugget objectives were twofold. The first was to test the nation's ability to mobilize across five sectors—military manpower, civilian manpower, transportation, maintenance, and supply—as well as the force structure's flexibility under stress. The second objective was to examine how well the DoD and the OSD could conduct command and control over total force mobilization.¹³³

The intent of the exercise was to identify gaps and challenges. To that end, it was wildly successful. One journalist commented, "That exercise should stand forever as the mobilization model for Murphy's Law.

Almost anything that could have gone wrong did."¹³⁴ Some of the shortfalls were expected; planners of the exercise predicted how several hypotheses regarding deficiencies in communication, infrastructure, and force planning would unfold.¹³⁵

Redundancies and contradictions abounded. There was a notable lack of documentation outlining objectives, authorities, or jurisdictions. What did exist was a "hodgepodge" of executive orders and policies, many of which were out of date or fully obsolete.¹³⁶ The DoD's three separate transportation agencies (Military Airlift Command, Military Sealift Command, and Military Traffic Management Command) could not coordinate troop movement, resupply, and civilian evacuation. Between ineffectual transportation and quickly depleted stockpiles of equipment, weapons, and ammunition, logistics infrastructure stalled.

Nowhere were existing readiness gaps more apparent than with the military's airlift capabilities. Military Airlift Command did not have enough planes to fulfill its required missions within the exercise parameters. As the "war" progressed and airlift was required in a new place, planes had to be reshuffled across the continent, stalling resupply and troop movement timelines. Additionally, several aircraft were required for civilian and medical evacuation that had not been allocated to such roles in planning.¹³⁷

The Nifty Nugget exercise led to several important changes to military and government readiness structures. First, it heavily informed the creation of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). While the concept of FEMA was first announced in April 1978, it was not officially formed until 1979. The results of Nifty Nugget and, more specifically, REX78 (which focused specifically on the civilian government and industrial base ability to respond to emergencies) provided further evidence of the need for an agency with the explicit authority over all preparedness and response activities. The Nifty Nugget exercise also illuminated specific roles and duties that could be placed within FEMA's jurisdiction to reduce redundancies and confusion.¹³⁸

Second, the challenges iterated in Nifty Nugget directly led to the creation of a single, joint Transportation Command (TRANSCOM) to consolidate and coordinate efforts among ground transportation, sealift, and airlift. While measures were taken to increase joint operations in the early 1980s, it was not until the passing of the Goldwater-Nichols Act in 1986 that all transportation components of the services were united under TRANSCOM.¹³⁹

Finally, President Jimmy Carter's decision to reintroduce the requirement for men to register with the Selective Service System was influenced by the challenges that military leaders faced in generating the necessary trained troops to sustain combat operations throughout the Nifty Nugget exercise. Within the Nifty Nugget scenario, participants operated on the assumption that the Selective Service System was fully staffed, and the draft pool was up-to-date and available. In the event of a short-warning conflict, it would not be. Additionally, by 1978 there were already concerns that the IRR would not have enough service members trained in critical skills to draw from if necessary.¹⁴⁰

Proud Spirit and Proud Saber

In the decade after Nifty Nugget, there were two additional mobilization exercises: Proud Spirit in 1980 and Proud Saber in 1982. Proud Spirit was a shorter exercise involving a similar set of agencies and departments to Nifty Nugget, examining mobilization in a period of growing international tension short of armed conflict.¹⁴¹ Results were only slightly better than in 1978. Command and control were severely hampered by technological malfunctions. Proud Spirit relied upon the electronic Worldwide Military Command and Control System computer program, which was quickly overloaded by the quantity of inputs from just a simulated conflict scenario.¹⁴²

However, the Proud Saber exercise in 1982 was a different story. Like Nifty Nugget, Proud Saber operated in an assumed-wartime environment. However, it had a more geographically disparate scope. Unlike Nifty Nugget and Proud Spirit, the results of the Proud Saber exercise were much more positive. Coordination in transportation and logistics were improving due to force restructuring within the DoD, and Worldwide Military Command and Control System operated as intended. However, Proud Saber identified continued shortfalls in the legal framework of authorities regarding mobilization of both manpower and the industrial base.¹⁴³ This prompted the creation a Master Mobilization Plan by the OSD, which compiled in a single place the legal and procedural documentation current to 1988 for each party with authorization over mobilization.¹⁴⁴ This plan remains one of the most recent mobilization policy documents.

Because the federal government has not fully tested the nation's mobilization capacity in the last five decades, CNAS developed a tabletop exercise to identify potential challenges to future draft mobilization. The next section outlines the exercise and captures insights from the scenario rooted in the current National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy (NDS).

DRAFT MOBILIZATION CAPABILITY AS A DETERRENT

The 2022 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) details the current threat environment and national approach to addressing future threats.¹⁴⁵ The unclassified version of the NDS "directs the Department [of Defense] to act urgently to sustain and strengthen U.S. deterrence, with the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the pacing challenge for the Department."¹⁴⁶ One of the four defense priorities outlined in the strategy is to "deter aggression and be prepared to prevail in conflict when necessary." The document further outlines three types of deterrence: deterrence by denial, deterrence by resilience, and deterrence by direct and collective cost imposition. U.S. draft mobilization capability is one form of deterrence by resilience, defined as "the ability to withstand, fight through, and recover quickly from disruption."¹⁴⁷ The ability to generate and deliver human capital to the fight—even under worst-case scenarios of high casualty rates—signals to the PRC that the United States will be able to prevail in protracted and disruptive combat.

Moreover, there are strong signals that the PRC is highly averse to being drawn into a protracted conflict. Current analysis of Chinese decision-making and strategy indicates that the PRC prioritizes first-strike, surprise attacks where it can control the initiative.¹⁴⁸ Survey data of public opinion in China further indicate an aversion to protracted military conflict and suggest that the costs of executing a war decrease public support for any military expansion.¹⁴⁹ Taken together, these dynamics set conditions that may dissuade and deter the PRC from engaging in direct hostilities if it is clear that the United States has the mobilization capacity and the will—both with respect to human capital and industrial strength—to maintain and succeed in a protracted conflict.

Tabletop Exercise: Back to the Drafting Board

Given the mobilization challenges identified in historical U.S. exercises and the growing need to meet demands of great power conflict, the United States may once again need to improve the mobilization process. In the vein of prior DoD-led exercises, the CNAS Military, Veterans, and Society research team developed a tabletop exercise (TTX) to identify and explore potential challenges to future draft mobilization that could be overcome in peacetime, prior to a crisis or

conflict, to strengthen U.S. preparedness and deterrence. While the previous sections assessed empirical findings from the historical record, data, and current law and policy, informing the exercise design, the TTX enabled the research team to examine dynamics that have remained underexplored in the 50 years since the end of American conscription. This section provides background on the TTX design and lays out insights observed during the one-day exercise.

The insights developed during the TTX are not intended to serve as predictive—yet they provide valuable feedback from which policymakers, legislators, and uniformed leadership could learn, and identifies areas for further examination and prevention in a peacetime setting. The insights derived from the TTX, as detailed below, are further supplemented with historical and comparative research, data, and legal and policy analysis to enhance their value and applicability to key decision-makers.

Exercise Design

Back to the Drafting Board was a mock draft mobilization exercise intended to explore potential challenges in the mobilization of a future draft for combat operations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). The exercise examined a scenario with two important problem sets for the United States: the need for a draft to counter a future Chinese invasion of Taiwan and the need for a draft to counter a Chinese invasion of the U.S. West Coast. The first was selected because it represents the Department of Defense's "pacing scenario," commonly used in military planning and wargames.¹⁵⁰ The second was selected because it represents a significant and consequential situation that would require defense of the homeland, an NDS priority mission.¹⁵¹

Participants included academic experts, uniformed leadership (officers and senior noncommissioned officers, active and reserve component), civilian DoD personnel and mobilization staff, legal experts, and SSS staff. Teams were divided among the experts to ensure a balance of military and civilian expertise on each team. Where possible, individual service representation (Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force) was also equally distributed among teams. Each team further had a CNAS representative embedded in its group. Participants were divided into four teams operating under four separate sets of assumptions about law, policy, and practice for draft mobilization. The teams were divided as follows: Team One

operated under realistic assumptions (based on current data); Team Two operated under optimistic assumptions (under the best-case scenario for each stage in the process); Team Three operated under pessimistic assumptions (under additional stresses and delays, though still producing conscripts); and Team Four operated under realistic assumptions, but faced a challenge in which Selective Service System registration had been ended and needed to be reestablished before a draft could be implemented. Team Four was included to explore the value of SSS registration under exercise constraints to understand the potential impacts of the perennial calls from members of Congress to abolish the Selective Service System. Each team had a balance of civilian and military expertise.¹⁵²

All teams operated under several core assumptions. All teams (except for Team Four) operated under the assumption that the SSS exists and registration is still required for all men ages of 18–25. All teams operated under the current SSS planning factor that it will take 500,000 induction notices to produce 100,000 inductees to the military services within 193 days. All teams acted under the assumption that induction notices would still be distributed via hard copies in the mail. All teams (initially) operated under the assumption that the first individuals drafted will be those who turn 20 years old in the calendar year of the draft. The teams operated under the assumption that entry standards for military service remain the same as those for recruits in the AVF. Lastly, the teams were provided the same notional baseline data regarding population demographics, eligibility requirements, eligibility rates, and the policy, legislation, and processes guiding U.S. draft mobilization.

Prior to the TTX, participants were given a subject matter expert elicitation survey on potential draft mobilization challenges. The initial survey questioned participants about their confidence levels in the United States' ability to execute a draft and the federal, state, and local departments and agencies responsible for executing the draft. It also asked their expert opinion as to expected rates of conscientious objector, deferment, or exemption status requests in comparison to past conflicts, and specific concerns they had regarding the nation's ability to execute any part of the draft mobilization process in the future. Participants were given a similar battery of questions at the conclusion of the exercise to determine any changes in perspectives after the day-long exercise.

TTX Play

The teams were first presented with a potential crisis scenario in which the PRC conducted a large-scale invasion of Taiwan. Participants were aware that an invasion was about to occur and that there were signs that the president and Congress were considering but had not yet enacted a draft mobilization. The teams were encouraged to consider what steps could be taken at that point, and what information they would want to know regarding the draft-eligible population in order to swiftly enact a draft if needed.

The teams were then provided with a breaking update: the PRC had effectively invaded Taiwan, and Congress and the president had enacted the draft. The teams were then required to explore each stage in the draft mobilization process and determine both the length of time required and the number of inductees still in the process at the end of each stage. The steps included in the process—and the key questions asked at each stage—are captured in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1: EXERCISE DESIGN¹⁵³

Draft Mobilization Stage	Key Questions Raised	Variations in Exercise Design
Induction notices sent by Selective Service System to potential inductees	Is a hard copy of an induction notice in the mail still the preferred method of notification? What are the time tradeoffs?	Percentage of induction notices returned for bad address
Conscientious objector request rates	Will the rates of conscientious objection be higher, lower, or in line with historical rates?	Percentage of individuals who received an induction notice and requested conscientious objector status
Transportation to Military Entrance Processing Stations (MEPS)	How does the geographic distribution and throughput capacity of MEPS affect mobilization timelines?	Days added to the mobilization timeline given distance from MEPS or MEPS capacity to process individuals
Absent-without-leave (AWOL) rates (discovered when the individual does not report to MEPS)	Beyond those individuals who filed for an exemption, deferment, or postponement, what is the likelihood that individuals may refuse to respond to the induction notice at all?	Percentage of individuals who received an induction notice, did not request an exemption, and did not show up to MEPS in the required timeline
MEPS clearing rates	Given the percentage of American youths who are ineligible for military service, what rates might be expected of those found fit for service under draft conditions?	Variations in eligible population rates at MEPS, with the baseline assumption of 23 percent as reported by the Department of Defense in 2023
Basic training	First, given the current throughput capacity, how many individuals can we reasonably expect to be trained for a minimum of 12 weeks? Second, given the anticipated military requirements for future near-peer conflict, is 12 weeks of training sufficient, or might it take longer?	Variations in the length of basic training delays due to throughput capacity Variations in the types of requirements necessary for conflict, variations in age and experience for inductees, and anticipated length of training time required to bring inductees up to standard
Supply	Given the need to supply 100,000 inductees, is there sufficient backstock of necessary equipment, uniforms, and other material to outfit them?	Variations in available equipment, yielding time delays if shortfalls exist

While the results of the exercise should not be taken as predictive, they were instructive. No team was able to mobilize 100,000 conscripts within the required 193 days. Team One—operating under current constraints and informed by current data regarding military eligibility, mail return rates, and historical rates of conscientious objector requests—yielded 54,400 mobilized conscripts by day 193 and took 402 days to reach 100,000 mobilized conscripts. Team Two—operating under optimistic assumptions regarding the factors listed above—was still only able to yield 53,010 conscripts in 193 days; it took 211 days to mobilize 100,000 conscripts. Team Three’s pessimistic constraints (a 35 percent return rate on induction notices for incorrect addresses, an emergency injunction on draft mobilization to account for a Supreme Court decision on the constitutionality of an all-male draft, and a 35 percent rate of those who did not report to MEPS after receiving an induction notice) yielded 11,090 conscripts by day 193—and took a full 1,336 days (three years, 241 days) to mobilize 100,000 conscripts. Team Four, operating under the same assumptions as Team One but lacking prior SSS registration, operated as well as Team One but was faced with an additional 45-day delay in implementation as SSS had to be reestablished and account for registering individuals ages 18–25.

After the exercise, participants were provided with a scenario update: having observed that the United States was mobilizing in defense of Taiwan, the PRC attacks a location in southern California between San Diego and Los Angeles. While a more unlikely scenario, participants were asked to consider whether and how such an attack on the homeland would affect mobilization. While this portion of the exercise was not formally adjudicated, participants verbally discussed the challenges this situation would present and agreed that they would indeed add additional days/weeks/months/years to draft mobilization timelines.

Exercise Insights

After the exercise, all participants took part in a full group discussion to elicit insights on the implications of the TTX future mobilization. Core questions during the hotwash included:

- What assumptions need to be reconsidered or modernized, and how would you suggest addressing them?
- How have society’s perceptions of a draft changed since 1973, if at all?
- What role might social media play in a future draft mobilization scenario?
- Are there changes to standards that the United States would accept from a draft force that it would not accept from the AVF?

TABLE 2: EXERCISE OUTCOMES BY TEAM

Team	Number of Mobilized Conscripts on Day 193	Number of Days Required to Reach 100,000 Conscripts
Team One	54,400	402
Team Two	53,010	211
Team Three	11,090	1,336
Team Four	17,126	223

The hotwash discussion and the exercise itself produced important insights:

Changes to current standards may need to be considered by the military services in the event of a draft mobilization. The current military recruiting challenges highlight the selective and restrictive nature of current health, fitness, intellectual, and mental health standards for military service. If the United States needed to rapidly expand through a draft, the DoD and the military services would need to consider which standards could be relaxed to maximize access to conscripts while maintaining selectivity. Participants noted that the DoD and the services should consider such adjustments during peacetime to provide clear guidance should a draft be mobilized.

New definitions of the essential domestic workforce exempted from the draft should be considered. Participants noted that the circumstances under which the United States would mobilize a draft would also require an established industrial base, fully staffed medical care, infrastructure maintenance, and other necessary functions to supply and maintain the national war effort. Yet considerations of which jobs would support domestic workforce requirements in wartime are largely lacking from considerations of a military draft. Recent categorizations of the essential workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic may provide a useful starting point for analysis and consideration.

Legal challenges to all-male draft mobilization should be expected. A clear consensus emerged across exercise participants that the legal groundwork underpinning all-male SSS registration would be challenged in the face of draft mobilization. Individuals from across the political spectrum would contest all-male mobilization, particularly as all combat positions were opened to women in 2015. If a legal challenge was levied after the president and Congress instituted a draft, it would likely cause significant delays in mobilization when time would be of the essence.

The American public is generally unaware of alternative service requirements. Participants generally shared the view that a higher percentage of Americans would object to compulsory service in a future scenario than in the past—even higher than the rate of protests seen during the Vietnam War. However, participants do not think that the American public is aware of alternative service requirements for individuals who file for conscientious objector status. Participants indicated that a public awareness campaign may be necessary.

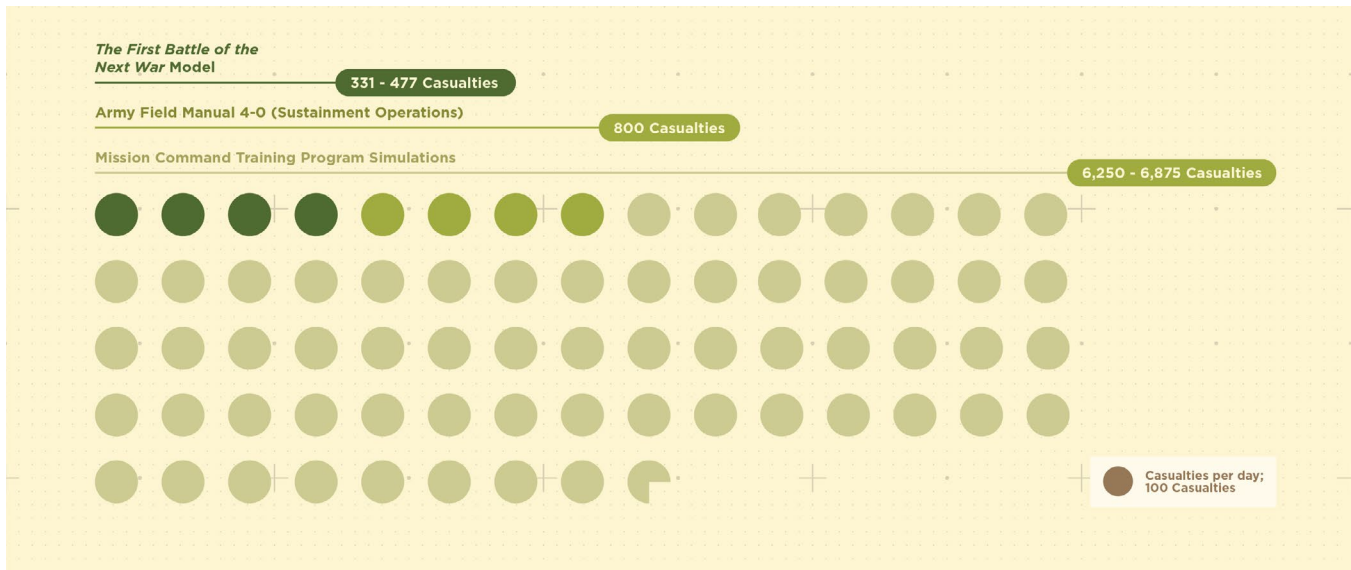
Social media has the potential to play a role in American compliance with future draft mobilization. A future draft mobilization is highly dependent on domestic perceptions of its enforceability. Domestic perceptions of the draft's enforceability are further likely to be sensitive to a belief that the draft is equitably distributing the life-and-death consequences of mobilization. Within this context, social media has the potential to amplify perceptions that a draft is being unfairly implemented. Social media further has the potential to spread disinformation from adversaries.

Building on the exercise insights, the following observations integrate findings from background research, interviews, expert surveys, and the exercise:

Given current standards of military service and demographic trends, there may be a point at which the population of 18–25-year-old men cannot produce sufficient numbers of conscripts. Currently, the population eligible for military service without a waiver is reported at 23 percent—the lowest level of eligibility since the transition to the AVF.¹⁵⁵ Reasons for ineligibility include those youths between the ages of 17–24 who present with obesity, drug use, medical conditions, physical conditions, mental health conditions, aptitude challenges, conduct issues, dependents, or a combination of these challenges. It is reasonable to expect, therefore, that the rate of conditions barring individuals from military service may also affect the rate of eligibility under draft conditions.

Historically, Selective Service System rejection rates averaged around 30 percent in 1940. At the beginning of World War II, of the initial two million men examined, 50 percent were rejected from military service, the majority of whom did not meet the physical fitness standards for service.¹⁵⁶

Current data regarding the availability of registration-eligible youths indicate that there may be a challenge for the SSS to yield 100,000 inductees. Census Bureau data suggest that the available population of individuals ages 19–25 (while not capturing the full range of registration eligibility, 18–25) is roughly 28,358,000.¹⁵⁷ Assuming that half of the population is male, the estimate of registration-aged men decreases to 14,179,000. If only 23 percent of those men are eligible for induction, the available population decreases even further to 3,261,170. Given current SSS planning assumptions that it will take approximately 500,000 initial induction notices to yield 100,000 inductees, there could only be about seven successive rounds of induction notices sent before the current eligible population is exhausted. This does not consider those individuals employed in essential industries.

FIGURE 2: PROJECTED DAILY U.S. CASUALTY RATES IN A CONFLICT BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA¹⁵⁴

EXERCISE LIMITATIONS

While this was only one exercise, it included multiple teams operating under different sets of assumptions, thus providing greater exploration of the issue and giving greater confidence in the insights derived. Nevertheless, the TTX was run only once and with a particular set of players. Moreover, the exercise contained a degree of artificiality in that participants knew that the conflict would not expand theaters, draft requirements would not grow, and casualty rates would remain consistent over the course of combat operations—meaning that the exercise was likely operating under optimistic parameters.

The lack of casualty rate assumptions in the exercise is particularly notable. Conscripts may be required as a long-term solution to replace early battlefield casualties. Current modeling projections for early casualty rates in a U.S.-China conflict are staggering. While not predictive, the model projections in Figure 2 indicate a pace of scale of potential casualties in the early days of a conflict as captured by the U.S. military and external think tank analysis. The daily casualty rates expected in the models provided further suggest that time delays in draft mobilization have serious implications for the nation's ability to conduct and succeed in a protracted conflict.

Given the current eligible population constraints, and the unknown potential for varying rates of conscientious objector applicants and/or draft dodging, there may be a case in which the current access to human capital cannot provide sufficient forces to meet military requirements under current law, policy, and practice. Options for expanding the population could include an extension of SSS registration to all Americans aged 18–25, an expansion of the registration to include older American men, and/or a reduction in the standards required for service.

Legal challenges to all-male Selective Service System registration may delay the implementation of the draft and undermine its credibility across society.

There is a long history of legal challenges to the constitutionality of the SSS's male-only registration requirement. However, to date, the Supreme Court has held that, given Congress's authority to "raise and regulate armies and navies," the historical restriction on women's combat service, and the combat requirements necessary for future conscription, all-male registration is constitutional.¹⁵⁸

However, given that combat restrictions on women were lifted with no exceptions in 2015, there may now be legal standing for an objection to an all-male draft. The Supreme Court most recently declined to hear a case objecting to the constitutionality of an all-male draft (*National Coalition for Men et al. v. Selective*

Service System et al.) in June 2021, citing the need to allow Congress to consider recommendations from the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service (NCMNPS) to update the Military Selective Service Act.¹⁵⁹ Notably, the case was not arguing that women should have to register for the draft, but rather that the basis of male-only registration is now unconstitutional. However, Congress has been unable to address changes to the law. If a draft is enacted (and no longer a theoretical question), such a case would be likely to have legal standing before the Supreme Court. The potential time delays associated with a legal challenge of that magnitude would severely hamper the federal government's ability to execute a draft adequately and efficiently in an environment where time would be of the essence. Further, the questions raised by such a legal challenge could threaten to undermine the credibility of the draft among Americans.

Levels of exemption, deferment, postponement, and conscientious objector requests, as well as draft dodging, may be higher than at other points in history. Trust in institutions has been declining for decades, reaching historic lows in 2023.¹⁶⁰ The percentage of Americans who have confidence in the U.S. military decreased from 69 percent in 2021 to 64 percent in 2022. Equally important for a draft to be effective is the level of American trust in the presidency (down to 23 percent) and Congress (only 7 percent).

These trends indicate that trust in the equity and utility of a draft—even in a time of national emergency—may find low levels of support, particularly among those being drafted. The SSS should prepare for higher levels of claims than experienced during the last draft, and the president and Congress should consider the enforceability of processes for managing draft dodging.

The professionalized AVF is unlikely to be prepared to absorb conscripts. Interviews with unit-level commanders, garrison commanders, and senior noncommissioned officers indicate that current service members are not trained to lead a force that includes conscripts. Service members in the AVF take great pride in the professionalism of military service. Elements of the professionalized force include higher levels of educational attainment, physical fitness, military training, and unit cohesion than the mixed force of volunteers and conscripts that preceded the AVF. The professionalism of the force provides specific operational advantages, namely the predictability afforded by highly trained individuals with a deep understanding of the chain of command.

Uniformed leaders should consider now how their service might best utilize conscripts in a future scenario.

Far from the past perception of draftees as “cannon fodder,” the modern AVF could benefit from use of conscripts to tackle support functions to further enable the professionalized AVF in a future war. The AVF could further benefit from the use of conscripts who bring technical skill sets not readily available in the professionalized force.

The registration process provides an avenue for collecting vital data. There is a need for better information regarding individual knowledge, skills, attributes, credentials, and preferences before a draft is enacted. Exercise participants agreed that the current information collected during registration—name, address, date of birth, Social Security number, and email address—was insufficient to plan for the requirements of future conflict. Additional information, including education, critical skills, medical availability for service, and individual preferences regarding which service registrants would prefer to be inducted into, could improve the execution of a future draft. It would increase efficiency, as those who are medically disqualified from service could be preemptively omitted before induction notice processing, and it would increase effectiveness, better matching knowledge, skills, abilities, and preferences to military requirements.

Current MEPS capacity is unlikely be sufficient to process the rate of inductees necessary. The DoD is currently facing challenges and delays in recruit in-processing at MEPS. These delays are largely due to a shift in the medical records platform used for recruit medical screening.¹⁶¹ The platform (Medical Health System GENESIS) more accurately captures medical data from a potential recruit's entire life, including health care records, medication usage, and mental health care records, requiring additional levels of screening. However, MEPS do not have the medical human capital necessary to process the additional screening and grant waivers when necessary, leading to long backlogs in new recruit in-processing.

This challenge is particularly troublesome when considering that the military services are facing a recruiting crisis.¹⁶² Even with fewer recruits than necessary, MEPS is struggling to manage the medical clearing process. If a draft were called and MEPS had to suddenly process between 100,000 and 500,000 inductees, the challenges would likely rise exponentially. MEPS would benefit from the additional human capital provided by the medical draft and could rely on the alternative service of conscientious objectors.

Recommendations

Insights from the multimethod research conducted for this report highlight the predictable challenges that may affect the execution of a future draft. Given that time and credibility (both domestically and internationally) will be of the essence should the United States require a draft, it is worthwhile to consider how each department and agency involved in the execution of a draft can test and improve their processes to ensure the nation's defense. Doing so preemptively will also send a strong signal to any current or would-be adversaries that the United States has the human capital necessary to execute a conflict, including a long-term protracted war.

The following recommendations are intended to strengthen the United States' ability to enact a draft and mobilize conscripts.

A Recommendation for the President

If a draft is required, consider the use of older conscripts within the registered population. The president has the authority to prescribe the guidelines for who is drafted into training and service from within the population of individuals “liable for such training and service and who at the time of selection are registered and classified, but not deferred or exempted.”¹⁶³ The current plan for draft mobilization is to begin the draft with individuals who turn 20 in the year a draft is enacted. However, the Selective Service System obtains registrations from men ages 18–25. Operational requirements in a future combat environment may mean that individuals with more experience or technical proficiency are needed. In that event, relevant stakeholders may consider older conscripts with additional skills and education more effective.

A Recommendation for the National Security Council

Run regular full-scale mobilization exercises across the whole of government. The National Security Council, Selective Service System, Department of Defense, military services, and other federal agencies, including the Department of Labor and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, should conduct large-scale mobilization exercises at least once every two years. Given the interagency nature required to incorporate across the whole of government, the National Security Council should be assigned the responsibility for facilitating regular mobilization exercises. The Department

of Defense should use the findings of such exercises to incorporate total force planning across elements of strategy, operational plans, resources, and policy.

Recommendations for the Department of Defense

Assess the military operational requirements in a future conflict, enabling a more tailored approach to future draft mobilization. Historical draft mobilization largely treated individual draftees as interchangeable parts. However, future conflict is likely to center on high-end capabilities and require technical proficiency and experience. At the same time, the professionalized AVF has experienced a revolution in talent management practices, aligning individual knowledge, skills, and experiences with military requirements. The Department of Defense should analyze the necessary requirements for future conflict and provide the requirements to the Selective Service System. The SSS should then expand the information collected during registration to enable data-informed mobilization.

Appoint and empower the executive agent for national mobilization within the Department of Defense. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 requires the secretary of defense to establish an executive agent for national mobilization within the Office of the Secretary of Defense. The executive agent is responsible for mobilization readiness and addressing congressional mobilization reporting requirements. As of April 2024, the position is not listed as one of the DoD executive agents. Per the law, the executive agent for national mobilization is responsible for “developing, managing, and coordinating policy and plans” and is required to report the outcomes of a DoD mobilization exercise to Congress.¹⁶⁴ The position could be empowered by expanding authorities to include oversight of equipping, transporting, supplying, and training draftees.

The establishment and empowerment of the executive agent for national mobilization will provide a clear DoD-led mobilization integrator. An existing challenge—given the distribution of responsibilities for draft mobilization across the whole of government—is that no one individual or office is fully responsible for effective draft mobilization. Yet the DoD and the military services will be most acutely affected by the efficiency and effectiveness of a draft, should one be implemented. Having a clear DoD lead with visibility across the mobilization enterprise can provide clear authority and accountability for the nation's ability to mobilize effectively.

Fully resource and staff Military Entrance Processing Stations, particularly the physical and medical evaluation processes. In recent years, the confluence of recruiting shortages across the military services and backlogs in MEPS processing timelines exposed a weakness in the nation's ability to rapidly process recruits. Such delays would be compounded if a draft were instituted, which would necessitate evaluations of up to 500,000 conscripts within 193 days.¹⁶⁵

Prepare the professionalized force—especially unit-level commanders and noncommissioned officers—to absorb a conscripted force. The integration of conscripts into the professionalized U.S. military is likely to result in both operational and cultural challenges. While much of the training emphasis focuses on the conscripted force, the DoD and the military services will also need to prepare the professionalized force to absorb and operate with conscripts through training and education.

Publish an updated Master Mobilization Plan. The last Master Mobilization Plan was released in May 1988. An updated plan should be produced with an emphasis on the changing global threat environment and modernizing processes given current human capital constraints.

Recommendations for Congress

Identify potential legal challenges and impediments to the institution of a modern draft and address them before a draft is necessary. There is a long history of legal challenges to the constitutionality of the SSS's male-only registration requirement. However, the Supreme Court has held that, given Congress's authority to "raise and regulate armies and navies," the historical restriction on women's combat service, and the combat requirements necessary for future conscription, all-male registration is constitutional.¹⁶⁶

With combat restrictions on women lifted with no exceptions in 2015, there may now be legal standing for an objection to an all-male draft. The Supreme Court most recently declined to hear a case objecting to the constitutionality of an all-male draft (*National Coalition for Men et al. v. Selective Service System et al.*) in June 2021, citing the need to allow Congress to consider recommendations from the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service to update the Military Selective Service Act.¹⁶⁷ Notably, the case was not arguing that women should have to register for the draft, but rather that the basis of male-only registration is now unconstitutional. However, Congress has been unable to address changes to the law. If a draft is enacted

(and no longer a theoretical question), such a case would likely have legal standing before the Supreme Court. The potential time delays associated with a legal challenge of that magnitude would severely hamper the federal government's ability to execute a draft adequately and efficiently in a situation where time would be of the essence. The questions raised by this legal challenge could undermine the enforceability of the draft among Americans.

Congress should therefore preemptively address the issue of all-male SSS registration and follow the NCMNPS recommendation to extend SSS registration to all Americans, preempting future legal challenges and delays to the operational human capital requirements a draft necessitates.

As reflected in the historical case studies, socialization of policies and public buy-in are necessary components of an effective draft. Recognizing the social and political debates surrounding the inclusion of women in draft mobilization, it is possible to socialize the nature of potential uses of draftees other than combat positions, which would apply equally to all Americans inducted.

Reconsider criteria for draft postponements, deferments, and exemptions. Criteria for postponement, deferment, or exemption may not reflect current social dynamics or defense-critical industries. Congress should require the executive branch to evaluate the current criteria for exemption and revise standards as necessary for the modern context.

Recommendations for the Selective Service System

Obtain more detailed information regarding individuals in the Selective Service registration process. The current process collects very limited information on men older than 18 and a half years old and younger than 26 years old, including their name, date of birth, Social Security number, and address. To institute a draft more effectively (should one be required), the federal government would benefit from additional information, including educational attainment, chronic medical conditions precluding military service, skill sets, and preferences regarding assignment to the military services and career fields or military occupational specialties.

Educate the public about what conscientious objection means and how conscientious objectors will be used in the event of a conflict. Interviews with senior officials and conscription experts indicate that

the public is largely unaware of what may be required of conscientious objectors. While conscientious objector status removes the requirement for combat service, it does not remove the requirement for national service in the Selective Service Alternative Service Program. Misconceptions about alternative service requirements may lead to false assumptions that conscientious objectors are not required to serve in times of national emergency.

Conclusion

While no president, Congressperson, or American citizen should desire future conflict with a near-peer competitor on a scale that would render the AVF combat ineffective, it is the responsibility of the executive and legislative branches to be prepared for such a scenario if necessary. The ability to mobilize the human capital required to sustain and succeed in combat operations is critical to ensure the nation's security.

The analysis presented in this report indicates that the United States is not prepared to mobilize a draft in time to conduct effective operations. However, the United States is now presented with an opportunity to plan for and enhance preparedness during peacetime to ensure American victory in a future conflict. Through this enhanced preparedness, the United States can signal to would-be adversaries that the nation has the ability to mobilize its human capital, overcome provocation, and succeed in long-term conflict.

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