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Ten Reasons Why Ending the Draft Helps End War

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The military draft has not been used in the United States since 1973, but the machinery has remained in place (costing the federal government about $25 million a year). Males over 18 have been required to register for the draft since 1940 (except between 1975 and 1980) and still are today, with no option to register as conscientious objectors or to choose peaceful productive public service. Some in Congress have been making "enlightened" feminist noises about forcing young women to register as well. In most states young men who get driver's licenses are automatically registered for the draft without their permission (and virtually all of those states' governments claim that automatically registering people to vote would just not be realistic). When you apply for financial aid for college, if you're male, you probably won't get it until after a mandatory check to see if you're registered for the draft.

A new bill in Congress would abolish the draft, and a petition in support of it has gained a good deal of traction. But a significant contingent among those who sincerely want peace vehemently opposes ending the draft, and in fact favors drafting young people into war starting tomorrow. Since coming out as a supporter of the new legislation, I've encountered far more support than opposition. But the opposition has been intense and sizable. I've been called naive, ignorant, ahistorical, and desirous of slaughtering poor boys to protect the elite children I supposedly care exclusively about.

Mr. Moderator, may I have a thirty-second rebuttal, as the distinguished demagogue addressed me directly?

We're all familiar with the argument behind peace activists' demand for the draft, the argument that Congressman Charles Rangel made when proposing to start up a draft some years back. U.S. wars, while killing almost exclusively innocent foreigners, also kill and injure and traumatize thousands of U.S. troops drawn disproportionately from among those lacking viable educational and career alternatives. A fair draft, rather than a poverty draft, would send — if not modern-day Donald Trumps, Dick Cheneys, George W. Bushes, or Bill Clintons — at least *some* offspring of *relatively* powerful people to war. And that would create opposition, and that opposition would end the war. That's the argument in a nutshell. Let me offer 10 reasons why I think this is sincere but misguided.

1. History doesn't bear it out. The drafts in the U.S. civil war (both sides), the two world wars, and the war on Korea did not end those wars, despite being much larger and in some cases fairer than the draft during the American war on Vietnam. Those drafts were despised and protested, but they took lives; they did not save lives. The very idea of a draft was widely considered an outrageous assault on basic rights and liberties even before any of these drafts. In fact, a

draft proposal was successfully argued down in Congress by denouncing it as unconstitutional, despite the fact that the guy who had actually *written* most of the Constitution was also the president who was proposing to create the draft. Said Congressman Daniel Webster on the House floor at the time (1814): "The administration asserts the right to fill the ranks of the regular army by compulsion…Is this, sir, consistent with the character of a free government? Is this civil liberty? Is this the real character of our Constitution? No, sir, indeed it is not…Where is it written in the Constitution, in what article or section is it contained, that you may take children from their parents, and parents from their children, and compel them to fight the battles of any war, in which the folly or the wickedness of government may engage it? Under what concealment has this power lain hidden, which now for the first time comes forth, with a tremendous and baleful aspect, to trample down and destroy the dearest rights of personal liberty?" When the draft came to be accepted as an emergency wartime measure during the civil and first world wars, it never would have been tolerated during peacetime. (And it's still not anywhere to be found in the Constitution.) Only since 1940 (and under a new law in '48), when FDR was still working on manipulating the United States into World War II, and during the subsequent 75 years of permanent wartime has "selective service" registration gone on uninterrupted for decades. The draft machine is part of a culture of war that makes kindergarteners pledge allegiance to a flag and 18-year-old males sign up to express their willingness to go off and kill people as part of some unspecified future government project. The government already knows your Social Security number, sex, and age. The purpose of draft registration is in great part war normalization.

2. People bled for this. When voting rights are threatened, when elections are corrupted, and even when we are admonished to hold our noses and vote for one or another of the god-awful candidates regularly placed before us, what are we reminded of? People bled for this. People risked their lives and lost their lives. People faced fire hoses and dogs. People went to jail. That's right. And that's why we should continue the struggle for fair and open and verifiable elections. But what do you think people did for the right not to be drafted into war? They risked their lives and lost their lives. They were hung up by their wrists. They were starved and beaten and poisoned. Eugene Debs, hero of Senator Bernie Sanders, went to prison for speaking against the draft. What would Debs make of the idea of peace activists supporting a draft in order to stir up more peace activism? I doubt he'd be able to speak through his tears.

3. Millions dead is a cure worse than the disease. I am very well convinced that the peace movement shortened and ended the war on Vietnam, not to mention removing a president from office, helping to pass other progressive legislation, educating the public, communicating to the world that there was decency hiding in the United States, and — oh, by the way — *ending the draft*. And I have zero doubt that the draft had helped to build the peace movement. But the draft did not contribute to ending the war before that war had done far more damage than has any war since. We can cheer for the draft ending the war, but four million Vietnamese lay dead, along with Laotians, Cambodians, and over 50,000 U.S. troops. And as the war ended, the dying continued. Many more U.S. troops came home and killed themselves than had died in the war. Children are still

born deformed by Agent Orange and other poisons used. Children are still ripped apart by explosives left behind. If you add up numerous wars in numerous nations, the United States has inflicted death and suffering on the Middle East to equal or surpass that in Vietnam, but none of the wars has used anything like as many U.S. troops as were used in Vietnam. If the U.S. government had wanted a draft and believed it could get away with starting one, it would have. If anything, the lack of a draft has restrained the killing. The U.S. military would add a draft to its existing billion-dollar recruitment efforts, not replace one with the other. And the far greater concentration of wealth and power now than in 1973 pretty well assures that the children of the super-elite would not be conscripted.

4. Don't underestimate support for a draft. The United States has a much greater population than do most countries of people who say they are ready to support wars and even of people who say they would be willing to fight a war. Forty-four percent of U.S. Americans now tell Gallup polling that they "would" fight in a war. Why aren't they now fighting in one? That's an excellent question, but one answer could be: Because there's no draft. What if millions of young men in this country, having grown up in a culture absolutely saturated in militarism, are told it's their duty to join a war? You saw how many joined without a draft between September 12, 2001, and 2003. Is combining those misguided motivations with a direct order from the "commander in chief" (whom many civilians already refer to in those terms) really what we want to experiment with? *To protect the world from war?!*

5. The supposedly non-existent peace movement is quite real. Yes, of course, all movements were bigger in the 1960s and they did a great deal of good, and I'd willingly die to bring back that level of positive engagement. But the notion that there has been no peace movement without the draft is false. The strongest peace movement the United States has seen was probably that of the 1920s and 1930s. The peace movements since 1973 have restrained the nukes, resisted the wars, and moved many in the United States further along the path toward supporting war abolition. Public pressure blocked the United Nations from supporting recent wars, including the 2003 attack on Iraq, and made supporting that war such a badge of shame that it has kept Hillary Clinton out of the White House at least once so far. It also resulted in concern in 2013 among members of Congress that if they backed the bombing of Syria they'd been seen as having backed "another Iraq." Public pressure was critical in upholding a nuclear agreement with Iran last year. There are many ways to build the movement. You can elect a Republican president and easily multiply the ranks of the peace movement 100-fold the next day. But should you? You can play on people's bigotry and depict opposition to a particular war or weapons system as nationalistic and macho, part of preparation for other better wars. But should you? You can draft millions of young men off to war and probably see some new resisters materialize. But should you? Have we really given making the honest case for ending war on moral, economic, humanitarian, environmental, and civil liberties grounds a fair try?

6. Doesn't Joe Biden's son count? I too would love to see a bill passed requiring that congress members and presidents deploy to the front lines of any war they

support. But in a society gone mad enough for war, even steps in that direction wouldn't end the war making. It appears the U.S. military killed the Vice President's son through reckless disregard for its own cannon fodder. Will the Vice President even mention it, much less make a move to end the endless warmaking? Don't hold your breath. U.S. Presidents and Senators used to be proud to send their offspring off to die. If Wall Street can out-do the gilded age, so can the servants of the military industrial complex.

7. We build a movement to end war by building a movement to end war. The surest way we have of reducing and then ending militarism, and the racism and materialism with which it is interwoven, is to work for the end of war. By seeking to make wars bloody enough for the aggressor that he stops aggressing, we would essentially be moving in the same direction as we already have by turning public opinion against wars in which U.S. troops die. I understand that there might be more concern over wealthier troops and greater numbers of troops. But if you can open people's eyes to the lives of gays and lesbians and transgendered people, if you can open people's hearts to the injustices facing African Americans murdered by police, if you can bring people to care about the other species dying off from human pollution, surely you can also bring them even further along than they've already come in caring about the lives of U.S. troops not in their families — and perhaps even about the lives of the non-Americans who make up the vast majority of those killed by U.S. warmaking. One result of the progress already made toward caring about U.S. deaths has been greater use of robotic drones. We need to be building opposition to war because it is the mass murder of beautiful human beings who are not in the United States and could never be drafted by the United States. A war in which no Americans die is just as much a horror as one in which they do. That understanding will end war.

8. The right movement advances us in the right direction. Pushing to end the draft will expose those who favor it and increase opposition to their war mongering. It will involve young people, including young men who do not want to register for the draft and young women who do not want to be required to start doing so. A movement is headed in the right direction if even a compromise is progress. A compromise with a movement demanding a draft would be a small draft. That would almost certainly not work any of the magic intended, but would increase the killing. A compromise with a movement to end the draft might be the ability to register for non-military service or as a conscientious objector. That would be a step forward. We might develop out of that new models of heroism and sacrifice, new nonviolent sources of solidarity and meaning, new members of a movement in favor of substituting civilized alternatives for the whole institution of war.

9. The war mongers want the draft too. It's not only a certain section of peace activists who want the draft. So do the true war mongers. The selective service tested its systems at the height of the occupation of Iraq, preparing for a draft if needed. Various powerful figures in D.C. have proposed that a draft would be more fair, not because they think the fairness would end the warmaking but because they think the draft would be tolerated. Now, what happens if they

decide they really want it? Should it be left available to them? Shouldn't they at least have to recreate the selective service first, and to do so up against the concerted opposition of a public facing an imminent draft? Imagine if the United States joins the civilized world in making college free. Recruitment will be devastated. The poverty draft will suffer a major blow. The actual draft will look very desirable to the Pentagon. They may try more robots, more hiring of mercenaries, and more promises of citizenship to immigrants. We need to be focused on cutting off those angles, as well as on in fact making college free.

10. Take away the poverty draft too. The unfairness of the poverty draft is not grounds for a larger unfairness. It needs to be ended too. It needs to be ended by opening up opportunities to everyone, including free quality education, job prospects, life prospects. Isn't the proper solution to troops being stop-lossed not adding more troops but waging less war? When we end the poverty draft *and* the actual draft, when we actually deny the military the troops it needs to wage war, and when we create a culture that views murder as wrong even when engaged in on a large scale and even when all the deaths are foreign, then we'll actually get rid of war, not just acquire the ability to stop each war 4 million deaths into it.

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War Is A Lie: Second Edition, published by Just World Books on April 5, 2016. Please buy it online that day. I'll come anywhere in the world to speak about it. Invite me!

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