

Is Permanent Conscription the Answer?

WILLIAM CLARK TROW

EVEN NOW the bills are being discussed in committees which, if passed, would place every young man in the United States in military uniform for training for at least one year under the direction and control of the armed forces *after the war is over*. As soon as he is 18 years old, or perhaps 17, or 19 (he may be allowed to choose), each young man will stop whatever he is doing and subject himself to a year of military training. This will go on every year—1946, 1947, 1948, 1949, 1950, and on into the future—whether the plans for peace for the postwar world fail or succeed. Thus, we are told, will it be possible to build up a great army and navy upon which we can depend, if need arise, and of which we can continue to be justly proud.

Before any such drastic step is taken, a step so contrary to all precedent in this country, it is important that it be considered most carefully by all of us. We are American citizens. We can decide. We should decide whether in the midst of war, with adequate laws for calling up men

for fighting the war, we should suddenly adopt a plan of this sort for the postwar period. We should discuss the plan with our friends and neighbors—not excitedly and emotionally, but coolly and calmly. We should examine the arguments carefully and weigh their implications.

These Are the Arguments

The arguments can be conveniently classified under four heads: military, health, economic, and educational.

The *military* argument: The country needs compulsory military training after the war in order to maintain an army to police certain parts of the world, to protect itself against aggression, and to prevent future wars.

The *health* argument: Compulsory military training would improve the health of the country by providing healthful living, vigorous physical training, and needed corrective medical treatment.

The *economic* argument: Compulsory military training would reduce unemployment by draining from the labor market a group of young men who would thus not compete with other workers for jobs.

The *educational* argument: Compulsory military training would give all young men a valuable educational experience that through the discipline involved would reduce crime, that would provide opportunities for vocational training, and would teach young male citizens the worth of citizenship through learning to defend it.

Such are the arguments that crop up in

In a clear, dispassionate analysis, William Clark Trow, professor of educational psychology, University of Michigan, examines the argument for permanent conscription and arrives at the conclusion that compulsory military training is neither necessary nor desirable. He challenges the effectiveness of such a program in achieving the goals for which it would be set up and regards it as a dangerous encroachment upon American democracy. Teachers will find particularly interesting his discussion of the specific educational claims made for compulsory service.

one form or another in support of the view that the training necessary for some men in wartime is necessary for every man in peacetime! In reality, the military argument is the only one of any real importance; for if we need a large standing army, and if such an army can be recruited only in this way, that is what we must have, whether or not other advantages accrue. It would be expected that every effort would be put forth to make the year as profitable for the draftees as possible under the circumstances. However, *if compulsory military training is not needed for military purposes, it is not needed at all*, and the problem of education and training for teen-age youth remains open for careful study.

Consider These Propositions

Unfortunately, there are some who seem to regard compulsory military training as a prize package, a kind of patent medicine that is good for many ailments, so if you take it you can't lose! It will be worthwhile, therefore, to examine some of these claims made for it before recommending it for any purpose other than that for which it is specifically intended. Following the four arguments cited, I should like to set forth four propositions:

1. Other means are more effective than compulsory peacetime military training for purposes of policing, defense, and war prevention.

2. Health is of civilian concern as well as military and can be more satisfactorily handled through civilian agencies.

3. A year's compulsory military training represents an unsatisfactory means of dealing with the problem of unemployment.

4. A universal compulsory peacetime training program under military auspices, except for military purposes, is uneco-

nomical, inefficient, and not in harmony with democratic principles.

Let us examine these propositions one at a time.

There Are Better Ways to Reach our Goals

1. *Other means are more effective than compulsory peacetime military training for purposes of policing, defense, and war prevention.* Every good citizen will agree that if compulsory military training is necessary for the attainment of these ends, we should have it. As Walter Lippmann has pointed out, we must be a little more realistic about our commitments. But every good citizen should likewise know what these commitments are and ask for evidence to show that such a wholesale procedure is necessary to support them. It is for those familiar with manpower problems, civilian and military, to determine without prejudice whether or not it is necessary.

For policing, the citizen will ask if needed quotas can be filled by voluntary enlistment. The increased pay makes the life of a soldier in peacetime more attractive than formerly. For the immediate future, when policing supposedly will be most needed, it should be determined how many soldiers, after mustering out and a brief experience in civilian life, will willingly go back to the army to which they have become accustomed.

For defense, which looks farther into the future, it is urged that compulsory training is necessary to build up a force which will make any other nation fear to take up arms against us. Further, it is maintained that if we had had such a trained citizens' army, Germany and Japan would not have dared to attack. This is pure speculation, of course. But it is easy to recall that the nations of Eu-

rope have toiled under a system of universal military training for years, but have never seemed averse to attacking each other. Germany flung her armies at France and at Russia, both of which employed universal compulsory military training.

Granted that the future shows no immediate prospect of national disarmament, the citizen asks for a careful consideration of the means of maintaining military strength: (1) Have the Army and the Navy developed plans for continued military research, and are they ready to incorporate new discoveries, or will they continue to fight the last war, as has been done in so many countries in the past, until after the next war has begun? (2) Have plans been formulated for the rapid conversion of industry into war production, should it again be necessary, with machine tools made, and ready to be used, so that the production front can move ahead at once without delays? (3) Does it take a year to train a soldier, when basic training during this war is for thirteen weeks? (4) Have the possibilities of short-time voluntary enlistment, great summer camps, and the like, been fully explored?

(5) Might a system of scholarships in the mathematical and engineering skills needed in the Army and Navy be set up to provide a pool of men for technical positions, where the real bottleneck exists because a longer training period is necessary? (6) What arrangements have been made for the development of officer training schools to provide the means for developing a citizens' army should any emergency arise? (7) What assurance do we have that the training which would be provided at the close of this war would be of value for the next, if there is to be a next? The citizen should have the answers to such questions as these before him

before he is asked to sign on the dotted line.

Health Is a Civilian Job

2. *Health is of civilian concern as well as military and can be more satisfactorily handled through civilian agencies.* This proposition is presented as holding not only for men, but also for women, whom the proponents of compulsory military training programs as a rule ignore. Half a loaf may be better than no bread. And it may be better to have half the population taken care of physically for a year than to have all of it neglected. Furthermore, it may be of advantage to put this half through a series of health tests and give it treatment for a year even if it gets no attention before or afterward.

The health argument for compulsory military training is twofold. Such training, it is urged, develops physical fitness, and it provides an opportunity for corrective medical treatment. So far as physical fitness is concerned, the proponents tend to wax lyrical if not occasionally illogical, one of them having urged that it will enable a young man to build a rugged body and find a purpose in life. It should be fully realized that the objective of military training is to develop effective killers, and the kind of training that is needed for this end, necessary as it is at the present, is not the kind that should be recommended and required for all our youth in peacetime.

Opinions differ as to whether a compulsory military training program should include the 4-F's. Some think it should, some think it should not. In any case, the military training regime is set up for the fit, and does not involve a differentiated type of program that will provide for the needs of the less robust, who are washed out. Programs for health and physical educa-

tion in our schools and colleges, in our industries and our communities, can well be made more effective than in the past, in adapting to the needs of all our people.

So far as corrective medical treatment is concerned, it is hardly necessary to feed, clothe, and shelter a man for a year that he may have his teeth filled or his eyes fitted! An adequate program could well be developed through civilian agencies that would provide corrective medical treatment not only for the men but for their sisters as well, not only for the 18-year-olds, after a bad health condition has run its course, but whenever medical care is needed from infancy on through adulthood.

Conscription Is No Real Solution to Unemployment

3. *A year's compulsory military training represents an unenlightened means of dealing with the problem of unemployment.* Since the economic argument is usually presented merely to indicate a by-product, it need only be stated that the setting up of a gigantic military WPA is hardly what is needed. Hitler reported no unemployed when he got everybody into the army. We do not need to argue for military training as a means of reducing unemployment. If every young man is to live for a year at government expense merely to draw him off the labor market, it is probable that there would be other activities in which he might more profitably engage.

It Doesn't Pay Off

4. *A universal compulsory peacetime training program under military auspices, except for military purposes, is uneconomical, inefficient, and not in harmony with democratic principles.* The argument for military conscription as an educational

program demands most careful examination by educators.¹

—*uneconomical*

The Army and Navy training programs have properly attracted nationwide acclaim for their successes, which have been due in large measure to the provision of unlimited funds, the definite war motivation, and the assistance of educational and psychological specialists, in uniform and out. However, these are training programs only, and are so regarded by military authorities. They do not profess to provide an education for those who are subjected to them.

With this basic point in mind let us examine the specific educational claims made for compulsory conscription.

—*inefficient*

The first claim, and one that is frequently heard, is that the military discipline would reduce delinquency. There is no doubt some truth in this contention. A young man, taken by law from his customary environment and placed in a camp where almost everything is out of bounds, will not disturb the local police! It is, of course, true that the discipline derived

¹ One official statement by educators reads as follows: "In our judgment it is unwise to commit the nation at this time to a year of military service." This statement with supporting reasons was adopted March 13, 1944, by the Educational Policies Commission of the National Education Association and the American Association of School Administrators and the Problems and Plans Committee of the American Council on Education, and appears in the *Journal of the National Education Association*, Vol. 33, No. 5, May 1944. Although the careful wording of this statement, and the phrase, "at this time," carry the implication that permanent conscription should perhaps be adopted later, the six reasons adduced make it clear that the educators were opposed to such conscription unless subsequent events should render it necessary for military reasons.

from the experience of living in an encampment and participating energetically in a program which is accepted as important is good for many boys, to supplement the experiences of home and school. But the citizen will raise two questions: (1) Do *all* boys need this type of experience for a year?—this he is inclined to doubt—and (2) can the ways be found to provide it for those who need it, and those who want it, which will make it even more helpful in the development of our youth than any single routine, military or otherwise? This question, he is inclined to answer in the affirmative.

The summer camp movement has been developing rapidly under varied auspices—private, educational, social, and religious, as well as military. Experiences have been reported and compared, techniques developed, and the camp director is fast becoming a professional person in his own right. The movement can and should continue, with differentiated and enriched programs. Camping will thus become an institution of the sort that it should be—one which satisfies the needs of the culture out of which it grows.

The second educational contention is that trade training may be furnished during the year of military service. If this is viewed as a by-product—a consolation prize—there should be no serious objection. But it would hardly seem necessary to undergo a year of military training to become an army cook or a navy bookkeeper. It would be another case of burning down the house to get the roast pig! In all probability the proportion of those who would learn a trade they would use in civilian life would be small in comparison with the number who might learn the intricacies of the mechanism of a gun that may be obsolete when the time comes to use it. Trade schools and training have

been developing successfully under private and public control and function adequately in this area.

The third contention, that compulsory military training would teach young male citizens the worth of citizenship through learning to defend it, has a patriotic appeal but falls into logical error. There is little evidence that peacetime conscription would do what is claimed for it. The program has two strikes against it before it comes to bat. Those who have their plans laid and are preparing themselves for some kind of useful work would not look favorably on a program that would take them away from it. And those who are preparing for the professions requiring three and four years of training beyond college would not be enthusiastic about another year's delay. Whether or not their attitude is commendable, it would render the development of an appreciation of citizenship by this method most difficult.

—*undemocratic*

Two further objections to a compulsory training period under military auspices should be duly considered, one that it is purely authoritarian in method, and the other that it is centralized in control. First, as to method.

There are many units of learning that can be acquired economically, if the learner is sufficiently motivated, by authoritative direction—trade skills, for instance. But most of the preparation for a profession does not fall into this category nor does history, or literature, or an understanding of natural or social science, or of philosophy. Even on the high school and elementary levels, techniques are being improved to give pupils an opportunity to think while they learn, to provide them with a background of understanding. It is easier to produce a skill

than the knowledge of how and when it should be used. It is easier to produce technicians than citizens who are the masters and not the slaves of their technology. If the country is willing to underwrite a program costing billions of dollars, would it not be wise to consider first the kind of program that will be most useful to its citizens?

The centralized control of a gigantic enterprise such as is proposed should likewise cause the citizen to pause and reflect. Those who shy away from bureaucratic measures even in an emergency situation may well pause before accepting a continuance of such measures when the emergency has passed. It may be argued with justification that centralized control is necessary under war conditions in spite of the many kinds of confusion incidental to it. But for peacetime education it is quite contrary to the American tradition. If we accept such control we should realize that we would be doing more than adopting a measure; we would be embarking on a new policy.

The American educational system has so developed as to include a high degree of local autonomy. The schools of a locality, within certain legally defined

bounds, are subject to the wishes and determined by the needs of the locality. The plan, while it has its weaknesses, nevertheless tends to develop a responsible citizenry and responsible local school management. The citizen may therefore well ask whether he wishes to relinquish this principle of local control unless it is absolutely necessary.

And after all, he asks, is it necessary to make this concession to "statism"? The European states have followed the plan for years. Do we need to imitate them in this and run the risk of building up a powerful military clique and a militaristic spirit among our people? We who have twice succeeded in maintaining our security by aiding in the overthrow of aggressor nations, who have developed our separate state educational systems with their high degree of local autonomy, peopled as we are by those who fled from the unhappy European continent in the hope of securing a new freedom across the sea, can we not find a better method of maintaining ourselves on this shrinking globe than by going back to the evils we sought to escape? Shall a vanquished Germany indeed succeed in taking her conquerors captive?

When You Write to Your Congressman (Continued from page 11)

Do not threaten, scold, or intimidate. You will not win his cooperation by threatening to beat him at the next election or bragging about how powerful you are.

Do not wear out your welcome with endless letters on the same subject. A few letters from many people are much more effective than many letters from a few people.

Unless you represent an organization having strong influence in his district, or unless you know him personally, do not waste stamps on a congressman living outside your home district. The above advice does not apply to letters written to members and chairmen of committees.

In addition to writing your convictions concerning a bill to your congressman you might well find out whether other people have the same convictions and if so urge that they write letters.—DONALD DUSHANE, *Secretary, Commission for the Defense of Democracy Through Education, NEA.*

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