

OPINION

Dump draft registration, don't extend it to women

By Edward Hasbrouck

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In this 2012 file photo, female soldiers from 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division train on a firing range while testing new body armor in Fort Campbell, Ky.

Photo: Mark Humphrey, Associated Press

Congress is now debating amendments to a pending defense bill to either extend Selective Service System registration to women or end it entirely. Congress should drop this costly and inevitably futile attempt to extend draft registration to women and, instead, end the draft registration altogether.

The debate was prompted by the change in policy that allows women in combat. If all combat assignments are open to women, then it follows that there is no longer a basis in

military policy for requiring men but not women to register for the draft. If Congress does nothing, pending court cases are likely to produce a ruling that the men-only draft registration requirement is unconstitutional.

Those who believe in treating women and men equally include those who would register both men and women for the draft and those who wouldn't require anyone to register. Missing from this debate has been whether it will even be possible to get women to register.

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President Jimmy Carter's proposal to reinstate draft registration in 1980, after a five-year hiatus, initially included men and women. Some of the strongest opposition came from women. The National Resistance Committee was founded at the Women's Building in San Francisco within weeks of Carter's announcement.

Carter's rationale for bringing back draft registration was to prepare for U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in support of the fighters who were then referred to as "mujahedeen," and who later became the Taliban and al Qaeda. (The U.S. government put me in prison in 1983-1984 for refusing to agree to fight on the side of the Taliban and al Qaeda.)

In the early 1980s, the government tried to scare young men into registering by prosecuting a handful of vocal nonregistrants. But the show trials backfired. They called attention to the resistance and made clear that there was safety in numbers. Enforcement of draft registration was suspended in 1988, and never resumed.

Young men today have to register in order to be eligible for student aid and some other government programs, but there's no attempt to verify their addresses. The only audit of Selective Service, in 1982, found that 20 to 40 percent of addresses on file already were outdated. Noncompliance has made registration unenforceable and the registration database useless as the basis for a fair or inclusive draft.

Any realistic budget for the expansion of draft registration to women would need to include the cost to track down, prosecute and imprison those who resist.

Young women have the same reasons as young men to oppose draft registration, and will undoubtedly have other reasons of their own. A petition to end draft registration entirely, started last month by a draft-age San Francisco woman, [Julie Mastrine](#), got more than 10,000 signatures in its first week. The petition quotes the young feminist writer Lucy Steigerwald, “You don’t stop the runaway truck of U.S. foreign policy by throwing a man in front of it, and you definitely don’t stop it by throwing a man and a woman, just to make things equal.”

The federal government doesn’t do well at acknowledging that its power is limited by the willingness of the people to carry out its orders. But draft registration has failed. The only realistic choice is to end it.

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