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## **Draft Lessons From Europe**

By Cindy Williams

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Although President Bush said during Thursday's debate that he would keep the all-volunteer system for bringing people into the military, the Internet continues to buzz with rumors of an imminent reinstatement of the draft. It is a subject thought to be worthy of serious discussion.

This must come as something of a surprise to our NATO allies, who have, over much of the past decade, gotten used to hearing U.S. leaders deride conscription as a relic of the Cold War and describe Europe's military draftees as undertrained, underequipped and undeployable.

Nicholas Burns, the U.S. ambassador to NATO, advised our European partners to get rid of their conscripts. Defense Department officials praised France and Italy for shifting to all-volunteer forces and applauded Germany's decision to trim its number of conscripts. Military leaders encouraged aspiring NATO members to put an end to compulsory service.

The United States halted conscription as the Vietnam War was winding down in 1973, largely in response to political concerns over social and racial inequities. Among NATO's members, Canada, Britain and Luxembourg also have a decades-long tradition of all-volunteer service. But all of NATO's other states -- including the new members from the former East Bloc -- relied on conscription to fill their ranks throughout the Cold War.

Since the mid-1990s, though, Belgium, France, Hungary, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain have ended the draft. The Czech Republic, Italy, Latvia, Romania, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia plan to phase it out within the next several years.

Each country ended conscription for its own reasons. Geopolitical factors played some role. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the large conscript armies that underwrote territorial defense during the Cold War seemed an anachronism. For the new members, the protection afforded by NATO reduced the need for large numbers of conscripts.

New military missions also figured in. Conscripts in Europe are often prohibited by law from serving outside their countries, so they are generally unsuitable for NATO's new expeditionary missions. Some countries also found that peacekeeping and the fight against terrorism required longer periods of training than their short terms of conscription allowed.

In addition, ambitions for military transformation -- fundamental changes in the way militaries fight, supported by modern information systems and other high-technology

equipment -- fed into the allies' decisions. Volunteers typically serve longer than draftees. As a result, they often perform better in military tasks requiring a high level of skill. Longer service also translates into lower turnover, which in turn reduces the number of recruits who must be trained each year and cuts costs. Decision makers in some countries hoped to divert savings to new equipment, thus narrowing the gap in modern military capabilities between the United States and the rest of NATO.

But while strategic and military factors clearly mattered, one of the most important reasons for European leaders was a weakening of the legitimacy of the draft. Across much of Europe, conscription was nearly universal during the Cold War, and military service was widely regarded as a duty of citizenship. As countries downsized their militaries, however, the number of draftees required to fill the ranks fell sharply. Eventually, so few eligible youth were called up that the draft began to seem unfair. Once that happened, young people quickly lost confidence in conscription as an institution of national life. By the time Spain ended compulsory service, some 75 percent of draft-eligible young men claimed conscientious-objector status. In the former Communist countries, outright draft avoidance and the costs of enforcement became serious problems. In nation after nation -- as in the United States during the Vietnam War -- popular support for conscription plummeted, dragging public support for the military down with it.

If the United States really is contemplating a return to the draft, it should give some thought to its own advice to European militaries. While not suited to every circumstance, volunteer forces are indeed more efficient and better suited to the expeditionary missions we expect and the high-technology capabilities we want for our military.

Even more important, the charges of unfairness across Europe echo a lesson we should have learned in the 1960s: A draft that is substantially less than universal is not politically sustainable in a modern liberal democracy. Even if the United States had to double the size of the deployable Army, our military would still need to draw in only a small fraction of American youth each year. And a draft that leaves most people out will inevitably appear unfair to those who are forced in.

America's future decisions about its own all-volunteer force will be national ones; what our allies do or say about it will not play a part. Nevertheless, the United States could learn a great deal from the nations that -- for reasons of their own -- followed our advice and dropped the draft.

*The writer is a principal research scientist in the Security Studies Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the editor of "Filling the Ranks: Transforming the U.S. Military Personnel System."*