

Time magazine calls for “universal national service”

New push for military draft in US

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Timed to coincide with the reconvening of Congress and the renewal of the fraudulent official “debate” on the Iraq war, *Time* magazine has published an edition with a cover story entitled “The Case for National Service.”

The coincidence is hardly accidental. It underscores the political fact that behind the squabbling between the Bush administration and the Democratic-controlled Congress over the best means for ensuring “success” in Iraq, there is a growing consensus within the American ruling elite and both of its parties in favor of reinstituting a military draft.

It is increasingly clear that the issue is not whether, but when to revive the system of conscription required to dragoon sufficient numbers of young men and women to sustain the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and provide cannon fodder for the even more bloody military adventures to follow—what President Bush likes to call “the wars of the 21st century.”

Looming over the current maneuvering in Congress regarding Bush’s request for an additional \$200 billion to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—a request that the Democratic leadership has already signaled it will comply with—are the administration’s preparations to extend the war into Iran. All of the leading contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination have explicitly declared that they would not take the “military option” against Iran off of the table.

The current issue of *Time*, dated September 10, features on its cover a picture meant to be a contemporary version of “Rosie the Riveter,” the World War II image of working class women who manned the arms factories while their husbands, fathers and brothers fought in Europe and Asia.

It sets the tone for the cynical effort of the magazine and its managing editor, Richard Stengel, who authored the article, to formulate the outlines of a propaganda offensive that will appeal to patriotic, democratic and idealistic sentiments in support of a program of civic-minded “national service,” behind which lurks the revival of the draft for the first time since 1973, during the Vietnam War.

Stengel begins by invoking the birth of the American Republic and argues that what he calls universal national service is the only means of overcoming the social and political malaise of US society and the alienation of broad masses of Americans from the government and all official institutions.

“[F]ree societies do not stay free without the involvement of their citizens,” he writes, adding, “The last time we demanded

anything else from people [other than voting and paying taxes] was when the draft ended in 1973.”

“When Americans look around right now,” he continues, “they see a public school system with 38 percent of fourth-graders unable to read at a basic level; they see the cost of health insurance escalating as 47 million people go uninsured; they see a government that responded ineptly to a hurricane in New Orleans; and they see a war whose ends they do not completely value or understand.”

He then notes that volunteerism is at near all-time highs, and seeks to appeal to the desire of people, especially young people, to devote their time to the betterment of society. Like many before him, he invokes what he calls the spirit of sacrifice that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks, writing, “After 9/11, Americans were hungry to be asked to do something, to make some kind of sacrifice, and what they mostly remember is being asked to go shopping...”

“People see volunteering not as a form of public service but as an antidote to it. That is not a recipe for keeping a republic.”

“[T]he way to keep the Republic,” he declares, “is universal national service... [I]t is time for the next president to mine the desire that is out there for serving and create a program of universal national service that will be his—or her—legacy for decades to come. It is the simple but compelling idea that devoting a year or more to national service, whether military or civilian, should become a countrywide rite of passage, the common expectation and widespread experience of virtually every young American.”

Stengel then notes the increasing sentiment within both the Republican and Democratic parties in favor of some form of military draft (without actually using the term). He writes:

“But these days there is a growing consensus on Capitol Hill that the private and public spheres can be linked... One of the early critics of AmeriCorps, John McCain, has since become a devout supporter... ‘National Service is a crucial means of making our patriotism real, to the benefit of both ourselves and our country’.”

Stengel neglects to mention that McCain is among the most strident defenders of the Bush administration’s military escalation in Iraq and its belligerent war-mongering against Iran.

The *Time* magazine article emphasizes the domestic, peaceful uses to which a system of national service could be applied, stating: “Young men and women have made their patriotism all too real by volunteering to fight two wars on foreign soil. But we

have battlefields in America too—particularly in education and health care—and the commitment of soldiers abroad has left others yearning to make a parallel commitment here at home.”

It says the program should be voluntary, not mandatory, using “carrots, not sticks” to win recruits. It calls for the next president to establish a cabinet-level Department of National Service, which would institute a program, costing \$20 billion a year, that would provide some \$19,000 to people between the ages of 18 and 25 who agreed to commit to at least one year of “national or military service.”

Stengel and *Time*, in framing their proposal in this way, are well aware of the broad and deep opposition among Americans, and especially young Americans, to the war in Iraq and the broader policy of militarism of which it is a part. They know full well that a direct and open call for a mandatory military draft would evoke intense popular opposition.

That, however, is the inevitable logic of their proposal, and their article should be seen as a significant step in seeking to condition and manipulate public opinion in advance of a revival of military conscription.

Stengel makes no reference to the growing calls within the military and sections of the political establishment for a revival of the draft, and the factors that motivate such calls. There are serious concerns within the military, the foreign policy establishment and both political parties that the prolonged occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan have stretched the military to the limit. There has for some time been talk within these circles of the danger of a “broken military.”

These concerns are heightened by the implications of a military assault on Iran. Leading Democrats, in particular, have criticized Bush’s war policy in Iraq on the grounds that it severely limits American options for military action elsewhere.

Already, recruitment targets for the volunteer army are not being met, prompting the military to offer signing bonuses of up to \$40,000 and sparking discussions about foregoing the requirement that recruits have a high school diploma.

If Bush and his commander in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, are now talking about some reduction in force levels by next April, it is primarily because withdrawals are virtually inevitable once the 15-month tours by the brigades sent in with the “surge” begin to end. Finding replacements will prove next to impossible, since every Army combat unit will either be in Afghanistan or Iraq, preparing to deploy there, or only recently returned.

The impossibility of sustaining such military operations over a prolonged period, let alone initiating new ones, is increasingly prompting open calls from military circles for a revival of the draft. Among those who have publicly broached the issue in recent days are Lawrence Korb, the assistant secretary of defense under Reagan, and Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute, Bush’s “war czar” for Iraq and Afghanistan.

One reason the Democrats are outpacing the Republicans in the race for corporate campaign donations for the 2008 congressional and presidential elections, a stark departure from previous elections, is the sense within the ruling elite that a Democratic-controlled government would be in a more favorable position to restore the draft that a Republican Congress or White House.

As of July of this year, the two candidates considered to be leading the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination, New York Senator Hillary Clinton and Illinois Senator Barack Obama, had raised millions more than their Republican counterparts, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney and former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee raised \$17.6 million from April through June, compared to \$8.6 million raised in the same period by the National Republican Senatorial Committee.

Significantly, the *Time* magazine article on national service is accompanied by a page-long endorsement of the plan by Caroline Kennedy. And among the most enthusiastic proponents of a revived draft is New York Rep. Charles Rangel, the Democratic chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, whose district includes Harlem and Spanish Harlem.

Rangel issued a statement on August 16 supporting Lute’s suggestion of a return to military conscription, in which the congressman reiterated his absurd claim that a renewed draft would be an antiwar measure.

He declared: “The White House knows that if the majority of American families were forced to send their children in harm’s way, our military men and women would be on the first flight home. The outcry for their return would ring louder than ever in every corner of this country, from the soccer fields to college campuses to the Wall Street boardrooms.”

Rangel attempts to portray the draft as a democratic and egalitarian measure, noting that “this so called ‘all-volunteer’ fighting force is already being fueled by a draft. It’s an economic one that lures minorities, women and poor whites in rural and urban areas...”

In other words, the answer to a volunteer army that recruits largely from among the most oppressed and impoverished sections of the population is a conscripted force that gives all sections of young people the “right” to kill and be killed in the pursuit of the global aims of US imperialism.

The *Time* magazine article should be taken as a stark warning of what is being prepared by the US corporate elite and the two parties that serve its interests. It underscores the necessity for the building of a mass socialist political movement completely independent of the parties and politicians of US big business, as part of an international movement of the working class against imperialist war.



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