

US Senate votes to include women in the draft

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On Tuesday, the Senate voted 85 to 13 to require women to register for the Selective Service System, making them liable to a future military draft for the first time. The move gave final passage to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, which approved \$602 billion in funding for the US military.

Six conservative Republicans voted against the NDAA, largely because they opposed requiring women to register on religious fundamentalist grounds. Seven Democrats also opposed the bill, mainly because it continues the legal ban on closing the Guantanamo Bay prison camp, which led to an Obama veto of a previous funding bill.

The Senate and House versions of the bill must now be reconciled in a conference committee, where it is uncertain whether the amendment will survive. Language expanding the draft to women was inserted and then removed from the House version of the bill, and the ultra-right opposition is stronger in the House than in the Senate.

The United States officially ended the draft in 1973 at the end of the Vietnam War, in response to mass opposition to conscription. However, the federal government still requires all male citizens and resident aliens between the ages of 18 and 25 to register with the Selective Service, which maintains the necessary records in case the draft is reinstated.

The move follows December's announcement by the Obama administration that it would begin allowing women in the military to serve in combat roles. The decision was understood at the time to also potentially expose women to the requirement of registering for the draft, because a 1981 Supreme Court ruling only exempted women from registering because they did not participate in frontline combat duty.

While hailed by elements within and around the Democratic Party as a victory for gender equality, the move was motivated in large measure by the need to

update the apparatus for mass conscription, which the Pentagon currently opposes using for its current operations, but which would become necessary in the event of a war against a major adversary such as Russia or China, or even Iran.

The decision to admit women into combat roles was initially opposed by some elements within the military, with the Marines' leadership citing a study that found that gender-integrated units were "less lethal," but the top military brass all supported women registering for the draft in congressional testimony this February. "I think that all eligible and qualified men and women should register for the draft," Robert Neller, commandant of the Marine Corps, told Congress.

The Amendment passed with broad bipartisan support from Senate Republicans. "I support it [because] I don't think you want to take half your population off the sidelines in case of a national emergency," South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham told the *Huffington Post* in May. Republican Senator John McCain, who opposed December's decision, has also spoken out in support of the expansion of the draft.

Democratic Party leaders have portrayed the vote to include women in the draft as a victory for "gender equality." Presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton, whose campaign has systematically promoted issues of racial and gender identity as a cover for her right-wing, pro-war politics, voiced her support for the measure the day after the vote.

Steny Hoyer, the second-highest ranking Democrat in the House of Representatives, told reporters in May, "Women ought to be treated equally. If you're going to have Selective Service registration continue, and you're going to have women available to serve in the armed forces in either front-line capacity or support capacity...then I think it makes sense to have eligible individuals, male or female, register as long as you

have registration.”

He continued, parenthetically, “Internationally, we are in a very unstable context. Therefore, it may well make sense to continue to have a pool available, a large pool available, in the event that we need to, in very rapid order, ramp up the numbers of folks in the armed forces.”

By “unstable context,” Hoyer means the real possibility that the innumerable small-scale conflicts stoked by American imperialism could coalesce into a broader war drawing the United States into conflict with its chief geopolitical rivals, above all Russia and China, two nuclear-armed powers.

Tuesday’s vote has been treated in the press and by politicians of both parties as having a largely symbolic value because of the current absence of a draft, which, they argue, will continue for the indefinite future. But a large-scale conflict with Russia and China would almost certainly require conscription on a huge scale, and the danger of such a course is made more and more likely by the extremely aggressive and provocative posturing by the United States and its allies. On June 13, NATO announced the deployment of 4,000 additional troops to eastern Europe as part of its military buildup along Russia’s western border. In Southeast Asia, the navies of the United States, Japan and India are currently engaged in joint military exercises that are clearly directed against China, which has responded by having its own ships tail the American-led operation.

Not only the draft, but even a nuclear exchange is a distinct possibility. Section 1654 of the Senate NDAA bill, “Sense of Congress on Nuclear Deterrence,” specifically names Russia as the potential target of a US nuclear attack. It calls for NATO to “make it clear” in its upcoming July summit in Poland that it “has taken steps to address the nuclear provocations of the Russian Federation” and calls for the United States to “maintain a nuclear force with a diverse, flexible range of nuclear yield and delivery modes that are ready, capable and credible.” The Obama administration is carrying out a \$1 trillion modernization program of the United States’ nuclear arsenal.

The reinstatement of the draft has long been promoted by figures within the Democratic Party. Representative Charles Rangel of New York has repeatedly introduced legislation to revive the draft,

alongside the imposition of a “war tax” on all income groups, with his latest such venture coming in March of last year. “Reinstating the draft would compel the American public to be part of the shared sacrifice and moral issues at hand,” Rangel wrote in the *New York Times* in 2014.



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