

Congressional commission recommends expanding US draft registration to women

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A national congressionally mandated commission charged with evaluating the Selective Service System announced this week that it will recommend to Congress that women be required to register for future military drafts.

The 11-member bipartisan National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service has spent the last two years holding information sessions on the issue in 42 cities and 22 states. The commission issued its findings in a 49-point report titled “Inspired to Serve.”

The purpose of the commission was to “consider methods to increase participation in military, national, and public service in order to address national security and other public service needs of the Nation,” according to the executive summary of the report.

The proposition that women register for possible obligatory military service was prompted after then-Defense Secretary Ashton Carter opened all positions in the armed forces to women, including combat duty. 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.

After failing to get the provision passed in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, the late Republican Senator John McCain and Democratic Senator Jack Reed (Rhode Island) formed the commission to “study” the issue and make recommendations to Congress.

It is clear from the extent of the commission’s findings that its real purpose extended far beyond the question of mandating women to register for the draft.

The majority of its 49 recommendations are focused on marketing and recruiting into the military, especially among youth. Proposals include “cross-service marketing, recruitment, and retention,” a vast range of “military

outreach” programs around the country, and an immense increase in targeting youth to get them to “explore service.”

A second important element of the commission’s findings is the emphasis put on the need to “convey to registrants their potential obligation for military service,” to “improve the readiness of the National Mobilization System,” and even to “build National Mobilization Exercises.”

The report states bluntly that “In the case of a national emergency, a successful mobilization of the Nation may ultimately rely on the moral mobilization of the American people: their support for the cause, which is based on the context of the national emergency, their trust in Government, and their perception of an equally shared obligation.”

Therefore, the commission also recommends in point 36 that “Congress amend the [Military Selective Service Act] to require the Selective Service System to develop and implement methods to convey to registrants the solemn obligation for military service in the event of a draft and to appropriate funds to accomplish this.” The report explains that “every registrant should understand the purpose and potential implication of their registration with the Selective Service System.”

In other words, the United States government is preparing for a major military conflict in which tens of thousands if not millions of workers and youth will be required to fight on behalf of Wall Street. Furthermore, they are aware of the overwhelming hostility that exists in the population toward war and militarism.

It is clear that the “National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service” was, therefore, tasked with finding ways to “prepare” the public for coming wars through a massive marketing campaign in schools across the country, and to prepare the government for a forced reinstitution of the draft under conditions of immense

opposition from workers and youth.

The focus on the question of requiring women to register for the draft is part and parcel with the broader plans to prepare for another major war. The inclusion of women into the Selective Service would vastly expand the pool of potential military conscripts, who would be much needed in the event that any one of the dozens of military flashpoints around the world were to metastasize into a major military conflict, or a third world war.

The commission raises this point directly in the report, explaining that the US population growth rate is at its lowest point in more than 80 years and that seven out of ten Americans of draft age, both male and female, are unfit for military service. “Roughly doubling the pool from which the Nation might obtain conscripts,” the commission writes, “would improve military readiness by raising the quality of those who might serve, as some women would be more qualified to serve than some men.”

The expansion of US military cannon fodder in the form of conscripted soldiers has been a long-sought-after goal of the US political establishment. In a 2017 report to Congress, the Department of Defense said explicitly: “Were Congress and the President to authorize the registration of women, the current cohort of about 11 million women in the primary age range of 18-25 would need to be registered in short order. ... Annually thereafter, the inclusion of females would almost double the number of registrants.”

Senator Reed, one of the commission’s architects, made it clear in a press conference Wednesday that Congress would work hard to act on the commission’s recommendations quickly: “This is not a report that should sit on the shelf—this is a call to action.” He went on: “It focuses on ensuring that our military and public sectors can attract and retain the talent necessary to defend and support the nation.”

The mechanism by which this provision will be sold to the American people is by invocation of women’s “equality” as the underlying motivation for the change. The report states: “That women register, and perhaps be called up in the event of a draft, is a necessary prerequisite for their achieving equality as citizens, as it has been for other groups historically discriminated against in American history.” Kori Schake, director of foreign and defense policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, is quoted in the report to make the case, ostensibly on behalf of all women: “It’s insulting to suggest America’s mothers and wives and daughters

couldn’t contribute, whether the need were rebuilding levees after a natural disaster or repelling an invasion from our shores. ... America’s daughters should be slotted into service as their physical and emotional suitability proves capable of, just like America’s sons.”

Debra Wada, the panel’s vice chair for military service, justified the call to broaden the draft in a conference call with reporters, declaring, “By leveraging the skills, abilities and talents of all Americans, regardless of gender, qualified men and women alike will be able to fill any and all personnel needs.”

“Women bring a whole host of different perspectives, different experiences,” said Wada, a former assistant secretary for the Army, noting that being drafted does not necessarily mean serving in combat. In a time of national crisis, the government could draft people to a variety of positions, from clerical work to cybersecurity.

“If the threat is to our very existence,” she said, “wouldn’t you want women as part of that group?”

The reinstatement of the draft has long been promoted by figures within the Democratic Party. Its leading female representatives, such as Hillary Clinton, have positioned themselves as the spokespersons for these reactionary measures on the pretense of promoting women’s equality.

Such measures so sharply expose the class divide among women. Upper-class women, who would never have to fight in a war, and whose money would certainly find a way to exempt their sons and daughters, put forward most earnestly the demand for “women’s rights” in the service of US imperialism and for the benefit of Wall Street. Simultaneously, they fight tooth and nail for the most reactionary economic and social policies, which leave millions of workers, men and women, to survive on the brink of starvation.

The promotion of such reactionary policies owes a debt of gratitude to the #MeToo movement, spearheaded by most right-wing layers of petty-bourgeois women who have sought to use the concept of “equality of women” to dull the democratic sentiments of the population in the most recent period. For this layer, women’s forced conscription into military service is surely hailed as a great triumph for “all women.”



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