

Imagine a version of the U.S. that required at least two years of military service for every citizen. Within a few months after turning 18, millions of teens head off to basic training, where they learn about being a member of the U.S. military. They serve for two years, during which they are paid a decent wage, available to them upon discharge. The money would be a nice reward for their service, and also provide them with a small jump on life. After service, some choose a career in the military, while others follow a different path such as college or a trade. Immaturity and poor decision making would be less problematic for universities, as students would be more mature and have a better work ethic. Students would have better knowledge of their interests as well, which would lead to smoother career paths.

The plan that I have proposed would take in immature high school aged kids, and help mold them into adults with a strong foundation to help them transition to the real world. Recruits would learn responsibility, leadership, teamwork, and respect. These are traits that seem to be of dying importance, but remain incredibly valuable for life as an adult. I think that the work ethic that would be developed during compulsory service would greatly benefit them and other citizens in the world. I see too many young people avoiding hard work and commitment, and I believe military service would solve that problem.

Time in the military would also provide an organized form of exercise and diet, which could help combat obesity and heart disease (two of the leading causes of death in America, and increasingly widespread among young adults). Too many young people get little to no exercise and eat an unhealthy diet, both of which could be addressed during service time. During service, members will develop good eating and exercise habits that will serve them well for the rest of their life.

Perhaps most importantly, I believe that mandatory military service would help in easing racial and class-based tensions in the United States. When recruits report to basic training, race and social class would be far less important, since everyone begins at the lowest rank. There is no special privilege for anyone, everyone puts in the same time and earns the same wage, which leads to a more even playing field when they are discharged. Most kids do not grow up with, nor spend time with, people who aren't like them in terms of race and class. I would mix recruits randomly so that everyone is forced to spend time with, and learn about, those who are different. When you spend time with, labor with, and grow with people, you get to know (and hopefully understand and respect) them. Required military service could be a key way of easing racial and class-based tensions in the United States.

This plan will have its complications. For starters, people will refuse to serve. As a country that treasures personal freedom, this plan will obviously bring some restrictions. Refusal to serve will have to be met with punishment, or in some cases, alternative options. Prison time is a potential choice, but would be expensive. Another option is a different form of national service.

Programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration from the Great Depression are great examples of non-violent national service. I would like to make choices like this available to people who have religious or moral objections to military service, such as Quakers. However, we need to ensure that these alternatives don't become an "easy way out," where people fake medical conditions to get out of service. Wealthy families must not be allowed, in other words, to pay a doctor to claim that they have bone spurs or asthma. To prevent this, all recruits will be examined by government-approved doctors. I am aware of the lengths some wealthy families would go to get out of service, so I would install a system of checks and balances to verify medical conditions. People will resist at first, but over time, this plan will become the norm. Citizens will realize the benefits that come with military service and accept it.

Another complication I anticipate is people with disabilities. Obviously, those with serious mental and/or physical disabilities cannot serve. However, I believe that roles can be found for the vast majority of people, regardless of their limitations. This may mean that some work office jobs, learning about strategy or history. These are ways to allow people with disabilities to contribute and learn the same values their peers are learning. Serving in the military does not only mean push-ups and wind sprints, as there are many different activities that teach teamwork, strength, and unity. As a country that preaches equality for all, I believe we can find ways to modify service requirements to fit the needs of everyone.

A final challenge I anticipate is how to accommodate expanded identities in terms of gender and sexuality. How would we house people who identify in different ways? The easiest way would be to have three different housing pods: men, women, and other. This separation would just be for housing, it is important to integrate different people into teams throughout the rest of the day. My goal is for people to work closely with people who are unlike them. However, for safety, it is important that people are housed separate. To maintain order, there must be strict supervision of these pods to eliminate any violence. Over time, when people see others with different identities working just as hard as they do, mutual respect will increase. With time, I believe we will become more accepting and unified because of compulsory military service.

I hope that readers can find a way to imagine my plan in action, and remember that it will not be perfect at first. It will take years, perhaps even decades, for the positive effects of this plan to become apparent. It will take time for mandatory military service to become the norm, and eventually even an honor. In due time, however, the positive effects of mandatory military service will make the U.S. a more equal, closer-knit country for all.