

*Albany Times Union*

Sunday, August 28, 2005

**To serve, protect or fight: The issue of national service is returning to the forefront**

By Thomas J. Raleigh

As the war in Iraq continues to require sizable troop commitments and military enlistments slip, a growing number of people are beginning to broach the possibility of reinstating a draft. To do so would be to do the right thing, the wrong way, for the wrong reasons.

We are still in the early stages of what will be a protracted struggle that will be fought on two fronts, at home and overseas. National leaders habitually invoke the rhetoric of generational struggle and noble sacrifice when discussing the war on terror.

Yet there remains a puzzling reluctance among our political leaders to address the disproportionate and unfair burden of this fight being borne by the relatively small number of our citizens who volunteer to serve in our armed forces. Few who hold elective office are suggesting even during a time of war that citizenship might carry with it an obligation to perform some form of national service.

Though the issue of shared sacrifice is important, the central focus of any discussion concerning the need for, or merits of, national service should be how such a system might help make the country more secure. This might require that we first redefine the very meaning of the term national security in the post-9/11 era.

We need to revise our national security strategy and shift the focus from efforts overseas (diplomatic, military, intelligence and counter-proliferation) to a more comprehensive security framework that includes mutually supporting and reinforcing domestic and foreign components.

Such a strategy would bridge the traditional way we think about national security shaping the strategic environment and projecting national power beyond our shores with new and urgent requirements related to securing the homeland.

Moving from the conceptual to the practical, we might wish to rethink how we spend our national security dollars. If our borders, critical facilities and infrastructure are vulnerable, we need to determine what resources including manpower will be required to make them more secure. This may prompt us to reallocate some defense funds (\$441 billion in the 2006 budget) to homeland security (\$41 billion).

As we transform our fighting forces, we ought to examine the missions of, and relationships between, active and reserve components. Since 1973, the armed forces have been organized under the concept of Total Force that requires active duty forces to rely on National Guard and Reserve units to conduct extended operations. As we approach the point of force exhaustion because of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, we must determine whether total force remains viable.

Once we determine the manpower needs for our fighting forces and for tasks related to domestic security, we can contemplate creating a new force concept, one that might feature compulsory national service a national commitment to national security.

This next generation force concept might:

- Preserve the all-volunteer nature of the core fighting services Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and the Coast Guard. Let's call them "regular forces."

- Create second-tier fighting units that would relieve regular forces of some missions, such as peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and possibly base defense of regular forces deployed in combat zones. This would allow regular units to focus on complex missions such as forced entry, special operations, urban combat and counter-insurgency.

- Abolish superfluous National Guard units and create new domestic security units some of which may report to state governors to guard our infrastructure, critical installations and borders.

- Establish regional emergency response centers and a corps of deployable first-responders specialists in civil defense and consequence management.

Some Americans, troubled by a lack of measurable progress in Iraq, have reservations regarding the role military force ought to play in fighting terrorist threats. Others, angered by misrepresentations of the threat posed by Iraq as the case for going to war was made, are wary of providing the government with capabilities they fear might be misused in what they might characterize as compulsive, unilateral military adventures.

Nevertheless, most Americans have not forgotten what occurred on 9/11. They understand that this nation remains threatened by ruthless and sophisticated operatives. They understand that defeating terrorist networks worldwide, and securing the homeland are complex, long-term endeavors that cannot be done on the cheap or by tweaking 20th-century security structures to meet 21st-century threats. And they understand that the only thing that might stand between us and those who wish to kill us might be a trained, dedicated and vigilant baggage screener, cyber-ninja, border guard, installation security specialist, linguist, police officer or infantryman.

If the threats to this country are as grave as our leaders purport them to be, we must consider making a national commitment to national security. The adoption of a system of compulsory national service one that is multidimensional and might include service in federal, state or municipal security or defense agencies might prove necessary to meet the requirements of manpower-intensive counterterrorism security tasks that will make this country safer.

If the nation is called, the nation will answer to serve, protect or fight.

\*\*\*\*\*

Thomas J. Raleigh of Niskayuna, New York retired as an Army lieutenant colonel after 22 years of service as an infantry officer and military attaché. His e-mail address is [tomraleigh@nycap.rr.com](mailto:tomraleigh@nycap.rr.com).