

Feeling a draft: One way to prevent war

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Last month Congressman Charles Rangel (D., N.Y.) proposed reinstating the military draft. He sees it as a form of vaccination, a way of inoculating the country against war. “A renewed draft,” Rangel argued, “will help bring a greater appreciation of the consequences of decisions to go to war.”

Rangel thinks a draft would also ensure that when the U.S. does go to war, the sacrifices of war would not be carried disproportionately by the poor and people of color. “If we are going to send our children to war,” said Rangel, “the governing principle must be that of shared sacrifice.” He pointed out that when Congress endorsed the use of force against Iraq last year, only one member had a child in the enlisted ranks of the military.

Rangel’s proposal has little chance of success. It is being dismissed by many as a disingenuous antiwar ploy. The notion that the draft can serve the antiwar cause was in fact recognized in 1973, when President Nixon decided—thanks to advice from conservative economist Milton Friedman—that instituting a volunteer military would dampen sentiment against the war in Vietnam.

Publicly, the military brass claims it doesn’t want a draft because unwilling soldiers make poor soldiers. Of course, that is especially true if the cause is not clear or compelling.

Rangel’s egalitarian concern is justifiable. But would a reinstituted draft eliminate all inequities and close all loopholes to the well-to-do and the well-connected? Probably not. And we should remember that the draft method currently on the books calls for use of a lottery. Those who draw a high lottery number can avoid military service entirely. To paraphrase Aristotle, luck would be your neighbor getting hit with a low number, not you. But luck is not the same thing as fairness.

Rangel's reasoning on the draft might backfire. Compulsory military service arguably ups the ante toward military engagement and aggression. As the late Harold Bosley, a United Methodist pastor and former chair of the *Christian Century* board, used to say, "To be prepared for war is to be predisposed to war."

The *Century* editors don't agree on whether reinstating the draft is a good idea. We can agree that if there is a draft, it should make provisions for those who cannot serve for reasons of conscience. And we think that better than reinstituting the military draft would be a plan to require national service for all young people, with community service (in the Peace Corps, Americorps and other programs) available as an alternative to military service. That is a proposal well worth wrangling over.