

Whom to Draft and When

Should the United States draft its physics students? Why not? Here are two logical questions, each with a relative value that depends on the point of view. Some of the issues they bring to attention matter mainly while Congress and the Executive are considering the draft law. Some of them matter all the time.

The arguments for drafting physics students—young and old—and everyone else without discrimination are strong ones. Why should some kind of an elite based on wealth, health, blood or wisdom stay at home while their neighbors or the boys from the other side of town go out and get shot at? History makes the world properly skeptical of special privilege and the groups that have it. The groups become corrupt, ineffectual and irresponsible. Particularly in America, where sirs, vons and commissars have no special significance, tradition favors a democratic society in which all citizens share responsibilities equally.

Meanwhile some anxieties exist lest special groups are now making themselves into elites that are to be treated differently. The newspapers tell us that healthy, wealthy young men are escaping the draft and that deaths in Vietnam are not distributed by the same laws that govern male births. Physicists and other scientists are not free of the imputation that they are looking for undeserved special privilege. Who do these guys think they are, ask some, that their roommates should be drafted while they go on after Nobel prizes? The arguments have some validity, and we make no plea for elite treatment of physicists.

As our story on page 69 shows, we get conflicting estimates of what

is going to happen to the draft and what effect it will have on graduate-school populations. Some say many graduate assistants will soon be off to the wars and that classes moving from the baccalaureate into graduate physics will be seriously depleted. Others, working with the same information, are optimistic that neither undergraduate nor graduate students will suffer appreciably.

We aren't ready to say that if the worst forebodings of the prophets of doom come to pass, physics and the nation and the world will be irreparably damaged. Project Hindsight tell us that national military preparedness depends mainly on technology that is relatively old. And we have known some competent graduate students who had previously spent several years carrying guns, flying planes and steering ships. Perhaps rumors of the death of physics are exaggerated.

On the other hand, it is not clear that a system disallowing deferments for science graduate students and choosing draftees with blind impartiality will bring the greatest good to the greatest number. Consider the individual. Some persons serve very well in physics departments but miserably in the Army—and vice versa. Consider national and world welfare. One can imagine several procedures that would be harmful. Suppose, for example, that graduate departments were suddenly depleted of teaching and research assistants. Suppose several classes of entering graduate students lost men to the draft who were not replaced by returning soldiers or other recruits. For a few years graduate departments might be relatively empty.

Matters like these are to be treated with great care. They are delicate. Like a sharp word to a young child, anything Congress and the draft do to graduate students may have deeper and longer-lasting implications than one may at first realize.

The present bouncing health of US science is not to be taken for granted, especially by those who do not understand it—and that class probably includes us all. Perhaps research can stand a couple of years of setback; perhaps a graduate department that is depleted for two or three years will bounce back with the return of soldiers from the front. But maybe not. Maybe the most promising candidates will not want to study physics when they come back. Maybe the manpower pool that made second-world-war radar and bombs will not be ready when the next stress comes. Maybe the continuity and tradition that make great science and provide scientific careers to those who enjoy them most and contribute the most out of their experience are not built or rebuilt quickly. Maybe, therefore, continuity and tradition should be carefully nurtured and protected.

We don't know the answers, and if we can judge from conflicting opinions, others do not either. But we think the matter is to be studied carefully. Some of you have clues to the puzzle. We urge that you contribute to the search for a proper policy. What will a certain change in the draft law do to your graduate classes, your faculty, your laboratory staff? Tell us, and, more important, tell Congress and the President's National Advisory Commission on Selective Service. We have heard that they are hungry for opinion.

—R. Hobart Ellis Jr