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Selective Service Promises

The 1968 Democratic and Republican platforms both promise to reduce Selective Service discrimination and to shorten the period of draft vulnerability and uncertainty. Both platforms also hope for an eventual change to a wholly voluntary military service, but that is not for 1969.

Neither platform proposes a system of national service (including military and civilian alternatives) for all young people. Nevertheless, the idealism of national service and its potential social and personal benefits make the concept an appealing one. It will be widely discussed, for it is the high-school debate topic this year and will be debated on some college campuses as well. Appearing just in time to provide much material for these debates is the report of a national conference on national service.*

In between national service and a wholly voluntary system are the platform promises of greater equity in selection and a reduced period of vulnerability. The Democratic platform also endorses a random method of selection. These changes could be achieved in 1969.

How the Selective Service System got to be what it is and how greatly reform is needed are the themes of a recent book by Harry Marmion,† the American Council on Education staff member who for the past 2½ years has been immersed in Selective Service matters. From this experience Marmion has written a knowledgeable, blow-by-blow history of the recommendations that evolved in the extensive discussions of 1966–67; the appointment by the House Armed Services Committee and the President of special commissions to study Selective Service issues; and the President's recommendations to Congress and his failure either to press for their adoption when a congressional Old Guard took command or to adopt those of his own recommendations—such as the induction of younger men first—that were permitted him by the Military Service Act of 1967.

What likelihood is there that a new administration will carry out the platform promises? Greater equity, a random method of selecting those who must be inducted through Selective Service, and a reduction in the period of uncertainty would all have widespread and bipartisan support. But Congress has already heard and overridden the excellent arguments for these reforms; Senator Russell and Congressman Rivers will probably continue to be chairmen of the armed services committees of the Senate and House, and are unlikely to want to take up in 1969 a law that still has 2 years to run; General Hersey is not one to advocate major changes in the present arrangements; and the heavily military Task Force on the Structure of the Selective Service System has reported that it considers no major change in the organization to be necessary.‡ The opposition to reform will be strong.

Only if the new President puts Selective Service reform high on his own list of priorities and either uses the power of his office to push changes through Congress or capitalizes on his opportunities to institute improvements through executive action can we look for betterment. The time to start pressing the winner of the November election to fulfill his platform's promises will come very soon.—DAEL WOLFFLE

* Donald J. Eberly, Ed., *National Service: A Report of a Conference* (Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1968).

† Harry A. Marmion, *Selective Service: Conflict and Compromise* (Wiley, New York, 1968).

‡ *Report of the Task Force on the Structure of the Selective Service System* (Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1968).