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The Need for Selective Service Policy

Unless the current disagreements on basic policy and operational procedures of the Selective Service System are resolved soon, 1968 will bring serious difficulties for the Army, for universities, and for graduate students.

The basic policy of the Selective Service System has been to allocate men where they could serve best. Thus some men have been drafted (or allowed to volunteer when draft seemed imminent); others have been deferred because they were engaged in critical occupations; and still others have been deferred because they would be of greater military or civilian value after further training or education. The system sometimes worked quite imperfectly, but its intent was clear: young men were to be used where they could best serve the national interest. An advisory panel appointed by the House Committee on Armed Services recommended a number of specific changes but advocated continuation of this basic policy.

Another commission, appointed by the President, proposed that equality of risk for military duty, regardless of wealth, color, status, or ability, become the fundamental policy. Accordingly, it recommended abolition of most deferments and use of a lottery to select from among 19- and 20-year-olds.

Congress did not accept the recommendations of the President and his advisory commission, but did make some changes. Undergraduate deferments will be easy to secure, but the student will pay a high price in later and long-continued draft liability. Graduate-student deferments will probably be substantially curtailed. The practice of drafting the oldest eligible men first may be reversed, so that younger ones will be called first. The President is still expected to submit plans for a lottery to replace selection through the discretion of the draft boards.

Depending on what agreements are reached next year, the services may, in the years beyond 1968, either (i) continue to induct a majority of young men and a minority of more mature and better educated ones, or (ii) secure only 19- and 20-year-olds from the Selective Service System and develop other means of finding the necessary number of junior officers, medical and health specialists, and men for other technical specialties. (The President's commission recognized that their proposal might require double jeopardy or double service for some men, at age 19 to 20 and again after college.)

However these questions may be answered for the future, the immediate problem is what to do about the summer of 1968. According to existing regulations, college graduates of next June and students who entered graduate school this fall will go into the draft-eligible pool in June. Under the existing practice of calling the oldest eligible men first, the services would suddenly get a group of men who are older than they want and better educated than any group they have ever had. Graduate students and prospective graduate students obviously want to know whether this is in fact to be the situation. Younger men of draft age are also concerned, for they want to be able to estimate their prospects. The colleges and universities must know what the policies will be if they are to plan in any sensible fashion on the size of graduate enrollments in the fall of 1968. The armed services also need to have decisions made so they can make their plans.

The time for deciding what should be done is limited. The President is not expected to submit new recommendations before Congress reconvenes in January. Quick decisions will then be necessary if those concerned are to have reasonable time for planning. Only the next 3 or 4 months are available for thoughtful consideration of what the new rules ought to be. —DAEL WOLFE