

October 6, 2021

The House of Representatives voted on Sept. 23 to expand Selective Service registration for a future military draft to women as part of the FY 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), and the Senate is expected to do the same when they vote on their version of the NDAA in the coming weeks. As a coalition of faith-based, human rights, and peace organizations, we oppose this expansion, which would bolster an immoral system that shouldn't exist in the first place. This bipartisan effort has received little scrutiny from Congress, with no line-item vote or debate on the issue by the full House before their vote and none expected before the Senate vote.

The debate on the future of Selective Service has gone on for decades, and the FY 2017 NDAA created a National Commission to study the issue over three years. However, both Congress and the Commission failed to seriously consider the most important question: whether the Selective Service System (SSS) should exist at all. The answer is a resounding no.

Selective Service registration has been a failure since it was reinstated in 1980. Most men refuse or fail to fully comply with the law, and it is likely that most women will also, rendering the records incomplete and inaccurate—"less than useless," as described by former SSS director, Dr. Bernard Rostker. The Department of Justice abandoned criminal enforcement of the Selective Service law in the 1980s, when their efforts resulted in an *increase* in noncompliance.

Draft resistance organizer Edward Hasbrouck, one of 20 men who were prosecuted in the 1980s, put it well: "As I testified to the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service, this proposal is a naïve fantasy in the absence of any enforcement plan or budget—something neither Congress nor the National Commission ever considered. Even locking up a handful of the most vocal nonregistrants like me failed to get most men to comply with the requirements to register and report changes of address to the Selective Service System. Trying to get women to sign up to kill or be killed on command will fare no better. Young women won't sign up voluntarily, and enforcement will prove impossible for them, just as it has for men."

By voting to expand SSS, the House has chosen to continue the charade, but for what purpose? If the list generated by SSS is useless, and enforcement is impossible, why is the system maintained at all? President Jimmy Carter reinstated draft registration in response to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979 to send a message to the world that the U.S. could be prepared for ever-wider war at any time, and this is still the primary purpose of maintaining the SSS today. However, there is no question that the U.S. volunteer force remains the strongest in the world. Given massive U.S. military expenditure—more than that of the next 11 countries combined—it's clear that maintaining the SSS as a symbol of our military "preparedness" is unnecessary.

Without irony, in the same week that the Biden administration affirmed its support for expanding SSS, President Joe Biden told the UN General Assembly, "We've ended 20 years of conflict in Afghanistan and as we close this era of relentless war, we're opening a new era of relentless diplomacy." U.S. credibility and commitment to working together as a global community to meet today's challenges are undermined by this contradiction. We cannot say we support "relentless diplomacy" while expanding and perpetuating the belligerent posturing of ongoing preparation for a draft.

Proponents of expanding draft registration to women have argued it is a matter of equality, yet in actuality it does nothing to address real inequality for women, either in the armed forces or in our society at large. Opposition to expansion is often misinterpreted as coming solely from sexist and paternalistic attitudes, preventing many lawmakers from seriously considering opposing expansion or repealing SSS altogether.

“Expanding the military draft is not feminism. Abolishing draft registration is,” a group of draft-age women from the CODEPINK Peace Collective stated in a recent op-ed. “We refuse to let our bodies be a source of endless cannon fodder and exploitation.”

A recent white paper by Women’s Action for New Directions (WAND) agrees, “Expanding Selective Service registration to women is not feminism. The Selective Service takes away personal choice, rewards militarism, punishes pacifism, and reproduces inequality [...] In seeking equality and non-violent responses to global challenges, we support ending the Selective Service for both men and women.”

This vote in the House and the upcoming vote in the Senate are not the end of this story. As opponents of the draft, we remain committed to the eventual repeal of the Military Selective Service Act, as laid out in the bipartisan Selective Service Repeal Act of 2021 (H.R. 2509/S. 1139, both of which remain stalled in committee), and to support for young women and men who are ordered to register for the draft.

Signed,

Church of the Brethren

Center on Conscience and War

Courage to Resist

Feminists Against the Draft

Military Law Task Force of the National Lawyers Guild

Objector Church

Oklahoma Objector Community

Presbyterian Peace Fellowship

Resisters.info

RootsAction.org

Santa Barbara Friends Meeting Peace and Social Concerns

United Church of Christ, Justice and Local Church Ministries

Women’s Action for New Directions (WAND)

World BEYOND War