

Testimony before the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service

April 25, 2019 | Washington, DC

Expanding Selective Service Registration to All Americans

MG Bengt Svensson, Defense Attaché, Embassy of Sweden

Chairman Heck and members of the Commission:

I appreciate being asked to offer my Swedish perspective on the question of whether to expand Selective Service Registration to all Americans, regardless of gender, and by doing so make it possible for all Americans to be part of a reinstated draft.

First, let me describe my background as it relates to this topic. I am a former conscript with national service at the start of my military career. I have trained conscripts, led conscripts and deployed with former conscripts. One of my responsibilities as Head of the Army Department and Deputy Chief of Army was to implement the transition from a draft system to an all-volunteer force and after that, as Director of Joint Recruiting and Training, to lead this transformation for the whole force.

Next, to provide proper orientation to today's issue it is important to have an understanding on how a nation populates their armed forces. This historical context plays a crucial role in an often challenging security environment especially for countries with a small population like Sweden. Since the 1600s Swedish military manning was based on a system of semi-professional soldiers supported by the village or town where they lived; a system that gave the King an army and navy with high readiness at a low cost. The introduction of national service in 1901 replaced this system to facilitate a larger force, which relied on conscription for its recruitment for the next 110 years. In 2010 an all-volunteer force was introduced to better man a military system more focused on expeditionary capabilities than national defense. In 2017, conscription was reintroduced leading to a force mixture of both conscript and volunteers which allowed the nation to better confront a deteriorated security posture in Europe. The reintroduction of the draft was met with little public reaction since a majority of the Swedish population was accustomed to the culture of national service and was positive to it. The current conscript system starts with mandatory registration for a whole year group when they turn 18. A portion of the group continues onward for tests and evaluations and about a third of those tested end up receiving conscript training.

The Swedish Armed Forces integrated women to serve in select positions beginning in the 1980s and opened all positions in 1989. Men were drafted for national service and women could volunteer for national service until 2010 when the system was changed to an all-volunteer force with all positions open to both genders. As stated previously, in 2017 the system changed again to a mixture of volunteer and conscript personnel and it remained open to both genders. The introduction of women into the force starting in the 1980's was not without challenges as was mirrored in other areas of the society. Arguments and attitudes concerning lowered physical standards, decreased readiness, disruptions in

discipline, increased sexual harassment, lack of role models, etc. were encountered. Most of this debate occurred well before 2017 and was not spurred by the decision of full integration or gender neutral conscription.

Today the Swedish Armed Forces has approximately 13% women throughout all of its ranks. The number of women rose very slowly from 1980 to 2010 despite consistent efforts to increase the number. There are several reasons for the slow increase but the main deterrent seemed to be the lack of parity in contacts with and exposure to the national service registration requirement and the Armed Forces. So, when national service was re-introduced in Sweden in 2017 the only possible option for the government at that time was to implement a system for all Swedes, regardless of gender. Key reasons for that thought process are outlined below.

First, it was the right thing to do. The values of the Swedish Armed Forces reflect those of Swedish society and discrimination based on gender is no longer acceptable. There was, in fact, no debate concerning the decision to expand national service to all Swedes regardless of gender. It was a given.

Second, the decision was necessary to increase the operational capability of the Swedish Armed Forces as quickly as possible. The volatile security situation in Europe demanded it. To exclude half of the population, both in numbers and talents, was a waste of valuable and limited resources and thus not an option.

Third, the experiences and lessons learned since the introduction of women into the Swedish Armed Forces in conjunction with the ever changing nature of modern warfare have proven to us that the benefits derived from a fully gender integrated force far outweigh any challenges that integration might create.

Fourth, the implementation and use of national service conscription or draft can be viewed as a type of tax, an obligation of citizenship, imposed on the population. To distribute this burden only based on gender is inherently unfair and would undermine the system in the long-term.

Each country chooses its manning system for its armed forces based on need, history, society, costs and, most importantly, which form of recruitment is most effective in providing the best personnel to fill its ranks. Different aspects must be considered and as SECDEF Mattis once said: Conscription may not always be best for the armed forces but it is best for the country. The debate will most likely continue, but what is certain is that my country is beyond considering the possibility to serve based on gender. Our society, security situation and the nature of modern armed conflict no longer allow for that kind of discrimination.