
Why I Am Against Conscription: An Open Letter to Members of Congress

by John Reed

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To the Members of Congress,
Washington, DC.

Gentlemen:

I take the liberty to write you concerning the bending Draft Bill because I have spent a year and a half in the warring countries of Europe as a war correspondent, visiting 5 fronts, and observing the human reaction to the war. Moreover, I spent almost 2 years in Europe immediately before the war, watching the inevitable drift of the nations towards war. With all the earnestness I possess, I beg of you to consider the following arguments against conscription:

Is It Democratic?

Most boys at the age of military service are working for their families and helping to support families. Is it as hard on rich men's sons? It certainly is not.

The Plattsburg training camps, the various officers' reserve corps, the college training corps, etc., *from which officers will be drawn*, are made up of the well-to-do young men who can afford to buy their training and education; and militia officers, too, must be men of means. In any conscript army, the leisure class will command.

Is it democratic to force men who opposed this war, and who do not believe in war, to go out and fight?

Many advocates of conscription declare that it will bring in all the war-shouters, the munition makers, the jingo editors. But these men are all too old to be caught.

Conscription will, on the contrary, forcibly drive into the trenches boys of unformed minds, boys too young to vote, or draw a will, but yet presumed by this bill to be old enough to decide the awful questions of life and death and international ethics.

Is It Physically Beneficial?

No man who knows anything of barrack life among the French and German conscripts before the war will have much to say in favor of herding young men together for long periods in military atmosphere. Col. F.N. Maude of the British Army says that English regiments of volunteers of mixed ages resist not only panic but disease better than regiments of German conscripts.

General Leonard Wood, USA, estimates that more than 50 percent of our young men applicants will be rejected on account of physical unfitness. In other words, the very men who need physical military training most won't get it.

The flower of our young men will be taken, and those who are not killed and maimed will be in no need of physical training.

Is It Necessary?

Ninety-eight percent of the men in the Union Army, during our Civil War, were volunteers.

There were more volunteers for the Spanish-American war than we could use.

England raised an army of more than 3 million volunteers, and could have raised a million more. Conscription was a political trick — not a military neces-

sity.

Canada has repeatedly rejected conscription, although in the third year of the war.

Australia has rejected conscription, the Australian soldiers in the trenches overwhelmingly against it.

Conscription Un-American.

Many thousands of people in the United States were opposed to war. Why should these people be compelled to fight for a cause in which they do not believe?

Is it compatible with American ideals of individual liberty of conscience to make men violate their firm convictions?

For the last 50 years this country has offered a haven for refuge to the finest blood of Europe, which emigrated to America to escape military service.

What Conscription Does.

Conscription not only drills men's bodies, but their minds. It makes them obedient to authority, whether right or wrong; takes away their power to think originally; makes them expert with guns, and therefore, eager to use them; and gives them a hatred of independent thought and contempt for human life.

In 1910, the employees of the French State Railway went on strike for decent wages and hours of working. They conducted the strike in a most orderly manner, without the slightest violence. Instead of conducting an investigation, or granting some of the demands, the French Premier, Brian, called the railway workers to the colors. They being all graduates of universal military training, took their places in the ranks and ran the trains as soldiers.

I happened to be in Bulgaria in the summer of

1915, when Bulgaria joined the Teutonic Allies in the war; and Bulgaria would never have gone to war had there not been conscription. The great majority of the Bulgarian people were opposed to war in general, and to the German cause in particular — 8 out of the 11 political parties being of that temper. The King and Premier, however, refused either to call Parliament or state the government's intentions. Certain events, such as the arrival of the imperial German military mission in Sophia, made the opposition suspicious. The 8 party leaders secured an audience with the king to discover the government's intentions; and at the end of this, the king intimated that the country would be drawn into the war on the side of Germany. The politicians left the palace and before they reached their homes, or before they could communicate with their constituents, the mobilization order had been issued. And no man dared to speak of peace, nor could any soldier exercise his right as a citizen to express his opinion.

Conscription accustoms a whole nation to the thought of war. Men who have had their military training carry the belligerent impulse and the blind respect for authority back to their homes, until the whole nation is permeated with it. It is not only in military affairs that this psychology is fostered, but also in politics, in industry — even in education, as we so clearly see in the social organization of Prussia.

Conscription and Democracy.

Conscription for the term of the war, which is the form of the present proposal, means inevitably universal military training, which is only universal military service in disguise. And that means that instead of being free to work for a larger measure of democratic progress in this country, American democrats must devote all their energies and their resources to fighting the extension of militarism in their country.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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