

VILLAGE VIEW

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Since everyone and his brothers and sisters seems to have an opinion about registration for a possible military draft, I may as well share my thoughts about that subject. Before I lay it all on the line, however, it's only fair to present a historical perspective.

When the United States entered World War II, I had just turned 18 and was in my first year of college. I had three brothers, one a couple of years my senior, one a year younger than I, and one 14. Eventually, they all wore a uniform; I worked for the American Red Cross and in a defense plant. We all had numerous friends of both sexes; most of them served, one way or another.

When I came in from an afternoon date that memorable Sunday in 1941, it was to hear FDR's radio announcement (there were no TVs; there were no atomic or nuclear bombs either) that Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor. We were at war, not only with Japan, but also with Germany and Italy. That moment was to change my life. Everyone's life.

Changes affecting me were not important. I was but a single individual. Changes affecting the entire world were and still are important. To understand what might have happened in the '40s, we must look at our nation's state of preparedness on that December 7th.

There was an army of sorts; it was primarily made up of volunteers, much like our army today. People had joined because the country had suffered through a long bitter Depression; they found it difficult to extract a living from the crippled economy. They were in the army because they got three meals a day, a place to sleep, and a government issue of clothing. For the most part, they were ill-prepared to fight, let alone fight seasoned troops.

The Pearl Harbor strike had essentially wiped out our navy, although civilians didn't yet know how seriously we'd been wounded in that arm. There was a small Marine Corps; each branch of service boasted a tiny twiglet of an air force.

Then, as now, our country stretched from sea to sea, and from Canada on the north to Mexico on the south. Friendly neighbors made our northern and southern borders relatively secure, but our east and west coastal defenses were nonexistent.

Had the Japanese but known it, they could have invaded our west coast and met only token resistance from lettuce farmers and vineyard growers battling with pitchforks and plowshares. Had the Germans invaded our east coast there'd have been nothing to stop them but a few hunters with shotguns playing Minutemen from behind stone walls.

The situation is almost exactly the same today. There's some protection from radar, perhaps; but there was at Oahu. The warning was not credible; it was ignored. That could happen again. Even if warning were given and heeded, what's to stop an invasion?

In December, 1941, and in ensuing months, droves of men and boys volunteered for duty. Wages and prices were frozen. Clothing, gasoline, sugar, butter and tires were rationed. Detroit stopped making automobiles and began building jeeps, trucks, and tanks, all manner of military transport. Kaiser rebuilt our navy. Aircraft companies toiled up for fighter planes. Cottage industries and small businesses converted to defense work.

The armed services began to train civilians to be soldiers. It was almost funny; and with typical American response to crisis, the ineptness and lack of preparedness of our fighting forces generated humor. Papers and magazines featured cartoons ranging from G.I. Joe to Kilroy; popular music became militant and nostalgic. "Coming In On A Wing and A Prayer" was more than a patriotic song. It was a good description of the entire war effort.

Learning to soldier was a harrowing experience for most people; there was no time for adequate training. Many had never held a gun before. Some couldn't read or write. To a goodly number wearing shoes was a new experience. Others had been raised gently, protected from violence, catered to and coddled. Almost to a man, the new armed forces were entirely unfamiliar with military discipline.

Like most people getting out of high school today, neither males nor females knew with any certainty what they wanted to do with their lives. Rare, indeed, were those with direction and purpose. Those few, along with the aimless, were drafted unless they enlisted; their personal lives and plans interrupted and postponed. For a good many, permanently. They didn't come home.

Many more, of course, survived the war; a few took up where they'd left off; some found their goals changed when they were mustered out; others, who'd gone into service without future plans, came home with definite ideas of what they wanted to accomplish, and had received some training for it.

Veteran's benefits, the G.I. Bill and low-cost home mortgages, made possible the realization of goals for those who utilized such services. After the war, the country entered a period of great expansion.

The above is an extremely abbreviated and incomplete picture of how things were, forty years ago. Most men and women who served in the armed forces during World War II are now grandparents. In the interim we've fought in Korea and Vietnam.

The generation now reaching the age where they'd be required to register for military service have only the vaguest memory of the conflict in Vietnam. The idea they may actually need to defend the United States itself has not occurred to them.

"Hell, no! We won't go!" is a slogan for some. Doesn't it occur to anyone it might not be a question of going anywhere? Isn't it conceivable war can come to us, here at home? What's to stop it? Our shores are defenseless, our preparedness essentially non-existent, and modern technology easily overcomes the barriers presented by the oceans. They are avenues, not walls.

The argument that registration, or even military conscription, will necessarily mean war, is specious. One of the few nations to remain uninvolved in conflict, even when all of Europe was ablaze with war, is Switzerland which remained neutral through two World Wars.

Every Swiss under 50 has put in a year of military training and spends a few weeks each year sharpening his military skills. Enemies attack the Swiss at their own peril.

As for registering and drafting women, why not? Women drive cars; they can drive jeeps, trucks and ambulances. Women operate complicated machinery in civilian life; they can in the military. Women work in offices, in plants and factories; women have served in wars in the past, have proved valuable in helping to defend their nation; why should they not be ready and prepared now?

It's women's country as well as men's. Only if they can be more useful out of service than in, if they're producing tools and equipment needed by those in combat, should they be exempt.

Women in combat? Some may wish to join their brothers there. We see plenty of feisty aggressive women today. The role of clinging vine is as passe as the hobble skirt. And most women would rather go into combat prepared than be raped or hostages by an invading enemy's army. That's why the frontierswoman learned to handle her rifle.

Let woman, as well as man, be prepared to defend herself and her homeland.