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Selective Service Troubles

The recently announced Selective Service changes depart about as far as possible from the position President Johnson took last summer in recommending reversal of the induction order to take the 19- and 20-year-olds first and the use of a lottery to choose the men to be inducted.

In making those recommendations, the President followed the advice of his own special commission on Selective Service. Their proposals were intended to provide the Army with inductees in the militarily most desirable age range and to eliminate charges of discrimination on grounds of economic status or color. In a further effort to avoid discrimination, the commission recommended abolition of student deferments. There were difficulties with these proposals: the idea of a lottery was not popular, and the earlier principle that Selective Service should serve the total national welfare by deciding which men should be drafted and which could serve more effectively in civilian roles was largely abandoned. Yet the proposals were consistently based on the socially important principle of equalizing the risk of induction, and they could have been made to work effectively.

But they were not followed. The President did not request abolition of undergraduate deferments, and Congress did not reverse the order of induction or approve a lottery. Instead, Congress adopted a law that is grossly discriminatory through the undergraduate age range in offering deferment to any college student who requests it. The law also granted the President wide latitude to decide about occupational deferment and deferment for graduate study, and gave him administrative means that could have largely reversed the induction order.

Since then everyone has been waiting to see how the administrative options would be exercised. The President has not gone back to Congress with plans for a lottery, but administrative alternatives of age quotas or the designation of a prime age group have been widely discussed. Most leaders of higher education, both individual and organizational, have made it clear they do not want blanket deferment for all graduate students or for those in designated fields but do recommend random selection from the entire available pool this year and an orderly change to a youngest-first system. L. Mendel Rivers, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, has been replying to recommendations of these and similar changes by saying that Congress passed a good bill that gave the President wide discretion, and that complaints should therefore be addressed to the President.

Instead of using the available opportunities to move toward the President's earlier recommendation, the new regulations will continue to draft the oldest first. The effects of the law and the new regulations will include these undesirable elements: for several years 19- to 21-year-olds will be largely free of draft liability; a new kind of discrimination has been introduced into the system; the Army will have increased difficulty in getting men of the most wanted ages; universities, especially those not in the top rank, are put into a very difficult situation; there will be a hiatus in the educating of just the sort of experts who make this country the envy of other nations—for example, those who run the research departments of electronic, aeronautical, and chemical industries, those we send as agricultural consultants to other countries, and those who can plan and implement the transportation, urban-renewal, educational, and sociological improvements the nation badly needs. The nation will pay dearly for the failure to choose the better alternatives available under the law.—DAEL WOLFLE