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The President Need Not Wait

For 2 years Congress and the President have been stalling on Selective Service reform. It started when the Selective Service Act of 1967 did not follow the President's recommendations, the advice of his special commission on Selective Service, the advice of an independent panel appointed by the House Armed Services Committee, or the recommendations of many educators. The bill adopted was widely considered to have serious faults, but Congress has not amended it, and neither President Johnson nor President Nixon has used existing administrative authority to make corrections. On 13 May, President Nixon asked Congress to amend the 1967 Act. But Congress has been deaf to the request, and the President has not repeated it. The score on Selective Service reform is still tied at 0 to 0.

In the long run, the President hopes for a wholly voluntary military service. For the immediate future, he has asked only for what was requested in 1967: abolition of the requirement that the oldest eligible men be called first, establishment of a prime age group (age 19), and use of a random method of selection to determine the order in which men are called for induction. These changes would satisfy the military wish for a younger group of draftees than they are getting now, and would greatly benefit all young men by making the period of prime draft vulnerability 1 year long instead of 7 years long.

Reducing each man's period of prime vulnerability—and hence of uncertainty—to a single year that would come at age 19 or, if he chose a college deferment, in the year immediately following graduation would largely eliminate the present disruptive uncertainties of planning by universities, graduate students, and prospective graduate students. Under the present system, as reported in *Science* last week, first-year graduate enrollment of male U.S. students dropped last fall by 5.6 percent below the 1967 level (the trend line would have predicted an increase of 5 to 10 percent); over 15 percent of this smaller group either entered service during the academic year or finished the year with induction orders in hand; and enrollment is more uncertain for this coming fall than it was last year, and probably will be cut more deeply.

The difficulties young men are having in planning their lives; university difficulties in arranging for an unknown number of graduate students who will be allowed to remain for an unknown time, and uncertainty over how many teaching assistants may be called for induction during the year; concern about the predictable dip of new entrants to the professions—all these are results of the failure to correct the faults of the 1967 Act.

The President need not wait for Congress. Using authority he already has, but by means slightly different from those he recommended to Congress, he could achieve the objectives of the requested legislation. If he does not wish to go that far, he could, by Executive Action, allow graduate students to complete a full academic year after they are first ordered for induction. The men would be inducted at the end of the year, but in the meantime they and their universities would have had a year of uninterrupted work. This improvement is being considered in government agencies. Unless it is made almost immediately, another year of uncertainty and confusion will follow. This is likely, for the record justifies the pessimistic expectation that there will be no substantial change until the calendar forces both Congress and the Executive Branch to take action shortly before the Selective Service law expires on 30 June 1971.—DAEL WOLFLE