

Draft Economics

by

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Seemingly-economic considerations appear to have won the day in the Supreme Court. Despite its ruling that the Tal Law (which legalizes draft evasion by the ultra-orthodox Jews) “inflicts serious harm to the human dignity of the majority,” the court decided to reject the appeals against the law. The implicit message of the Tal Law is: just do us a favor and go work – and we’ll send our children to defend you. On the face of it, a victory of economics over the principle of equality before the law.

Many economists may support implementation of the Tal law, just as in the economics profession around the world there is non-negligible support for rescinding compulsory military drafts in favor of professionals who volunteer, serve longer and are better compensated than conscripts. But things are not quite as simple. Economic considerations are not just limited to “go and work already” and to professional soldiers.

Prices and incentives play a central role in the economic thinking upon which national strategic planning should be based. The lower the price, the greater the desire to consume a product – and vice versa. When all citizens in a country have the right to vote and determine policy, but just a portion of these must shoulder the resultant obligations of that policy, then it should not come as a surprise when the desire to consume is much higher among those who are exempted from having to pay the price.

If ultra-orthodox children had also not returned home safely, because their parents sent the IDF to protect isolated settlements in the midst of Palestinian populations, then we might have been spared the last three decades of political insanity. Instead of investing the country’s limited resources in strengthening human and physical infrastructures that would remain part of the Jewish and democratic country well into the distant future, we paid an enormous price in blood and budgets when we sent some of our best and brightest to their doom and flushed our hard-earned money down the settlement drain. Had ultra-orthodox children served in Lebanon, more parents would have exerted pressure – and that adventure would not have lasted 18 years.

The full splendor of the post-draft model is on display in the United States. Conscription was replaced long ago with better-paid volunteers. When most volunteer soldiers tend to come from families with relatively little political clout, the outcome should be clear with respect to decisions determining the scope of a military campaign. A substantial portion of what the Americans saved over the years by building an efficient and professional army was lost because of over-involvement in Iraq.

Rather than pointing in the direction of an all-volunteer army of professionals, economic considerations in the area of national security actually suggest the opposite: full and identical conscription of everyone. This doesn’t mean that all draftees must serve in the army, though given the original purpose of the draft, this must definitely be the preference of the majority of inductees. Those uninterested in military service can opt for civilian national service. In order to provide the conscript with an inducement to serve in what the country really needs, the army, the law must mandate that civilian national service must be longer than military service by a third.

The more soldiers that shoulder the military burden, the more it will be possible to reduce the length of the conscription and minimize the personal economic price paid by those who today are drafted for lengthy periods. In light of relative birthrates within the country, what is difficult to implement today will be impossible in another generation. The full economic cost of that future scenario is anyone’s guess.