

Q&A: Professor Charles Moskos

Contributed by PT Editors
Wednesday, 01 February 2006

Lack of Shared Burden Bodes Ill for Country

PT talks to Charles Moskos, Northwestern University Professor Emeritus and military sociology expert, about national service, our evolving military and the rise of "patriotism light" in America.

PT: How has the lack of mandatory national service changed the composition of the U.S. military, and why is it important?

Moskos: In my graduating Princeton class of 1956, out of 750 males, about 450 served. Out of Princeton's 2005 class—1,100 male and female, approximately 50/50—eight served. That's the difference. I find it interesting that the two most famous names to come out of the Iraq war are Lynndie England and Jessica Lynch, two white, working-class women from Appalachia.

PT: What could the military do to attract college graduates and other members of higher social classes?

Moskos: I was addressing a military recruiting conference last year, and I asked if they would prefer to have their advertising budget tripled or to have Jenna Bush join the army. They unanimously chose the Jenna option. I asked that same question five years earlier about Chelsea Clinton and received the same response. But that's what you need; you need elite youth to serve.

PT: Congressmen Rangel and Stark have sought to reinstate the draft for a number of reasons. Where do you stand on their proposal, and why is the very idea of national service such a nonstarter?

Moskos: Well, I'm for it, but you're right—it's a nonstarter. Liberals don't like the idea of making people serve, and conservatives don't want to spend money.

The nation is in a stage of "patriotism light" right now. We're not even asked to ration gasoline right now, let alone perform national service. Neither the left nor the right is for any type of national service. The liberal line is "something for nothing," and the conservative line is "every man for himself." It leaves a gulf in the middle where nothing gets accomplished. When I talk about mandatory national service at dinner parties, people are very receptive, but few political figures want to touch it.

PT: Framing the issue in economic terms seems like it could help make it viable.

Moskos: It could. We're paying enlistees in constant dollars about three times what draftees were once paid. And in the long term, costs skyrocket due to retirement benefits when you have a large career force. What you really want are citizen soldiers serving one, two, three years—whatever. There are financial arguments for it too.

It's also interesting to note that draftees through World War II, Korea and Vietnam had a lower desertion rate than volunteers. It's very counterintuitive, but it's largely attributed to higher-quality personnel. About 30% of the people who enter the military today don't complete their initial term of service.

PT: You've also said that mandatory national service wouldn't have to mean combat. Besides programs like AmeriCorps and Teach for America, what else could national service look like?

Moskos: One of our problems is that we're not guarding things here. We have ships coming into our ports and we don't know what's on them. These homeland security jobs would be perfect for college graduates.

Peacekeeping would be ideal too. We have 800-900 people on the Sinai Peninsula right now.

I could recruit the class at Berkeley to do those jobs. Just say, "We'll forgive your student loans, help pay for your graduate school education, and you can go off to the Sinai for a year." It would free up our professional soldiers for actual combat in the hot spots around the world.

Charles Moskos is Professor Emeritus of sociology at Northwestern University. He is an expert on military sociology, and has authored several books and numerous scholarly and newspaper articles on the subject. He has been awarded the Distinguished Service Award, the U.S. Army's highest decoration for a civilian, and has been designated Honored Patriot by the Selective Service System.