

Thank You, William H. Meckling

We owe a debt of gratitude to the man who killed the draft.

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If you are an American male under age 44, take a moment of silence to thank William H. Meckling, who died last year at age 76. Even though you probably haven't heard of him, he has had a profound effect on your life. What he did was help to end military conscription in the United States.

Between 1948 and 1973, here's what you knew if you were a healthy male born in the U.S.A.: the government could pluck you out of almost any activity you were pursuing, cut your hair, and send you anywhere in the world. If the United States was at war, you might have to kill people, and you might return home in a body bag.

COLD DRAFT

Bill Meckling didn't think that was right, and not just because the Vietnam War was so reckless. He had been drafted into the army in World War II and witnessed the government's incredibly wasteful use of manpower when it could pay below-market wages. He tucked that lesson away and would use it 25 years later.

Meckling went on to become an economist. In 1962 he was named the first dean of the University of Rochester's new business school, where he continued until 1983.

Meanwhile, a 31-year-old economist named Martin Anderson joined Richard Nixon's campaign for president in 1967. One of Mr. Anderson's main goals was to persuade Nixon to end the draft, and he wrote the antidraft campaign speech that Nixon gave in 1968. Mr. Anderson then worked, as one of the new president's advisers, to end the draft. He helped put together the President's Commission on an All-Volunteer Force, whose 15 members included 2 former generals; 3 economists (Milton Friedman, Alan Greenspan, and W. Allen Wallis); 2 civil rights leaders; 1 student; and some businessmen and university presidents. It was chaired by Thomas Gates, who had been secretary of defense under President Eisenhower.

When the commission was created, in 1969, the members were not unanimous on ending the draft. In his recent coauthored book, *Two Lucky People*, Mr. Friedman writes that 5 of the 15 commissioners -- including himself, Mr. Greenspan, and Mr. Wallis -- were against the draft to begin with. Five members were undecided, and 5 were pro-draft. Yet when the commission's report came out less than a year later and became a paperback book, all 15 members favored ending the draft.

What happened in between? That's where Bill Meckling comes in.

Meckling was chosen as executive director of the commission. As soon as he started his work, he got a nasty surprise: he had thought that everyone involved was opposed to the draft and that his job would be narrower than it turned out to be. "I thought that I was hired to estimate supply curves," he joked in a 1979 speech; he neither intended nor desired to get into a debate over conscription. But Meckling quickly adjusted to his new position. He hired some economists (who estimated those supply curves) as well as some historians; members of both groups wrote papers making a strong historical and philosophical case against the draft. The commission's work was done in less than a year, under budget and ahead of schedule. Three years later, the draft was dead.

Of course, Meckling wasn't the only hero. Milton Friedman was very persuasive. One of Meckling's favorite stories, which his widow, Becky, recalled in a recent interview, was of an exchange between Mr. Friedman and General William Westmoreland, then commander of all U.S. troops in Vietnam. In his testimony before the commission, Mr. Westmoreland said he did not want to command an army of mercenaries. Mr. Friedman interrupted, "General, would you rather command an army of slaves?" Mr. Westmoreland replied, "I don't like to hear our patriotic draftees referred to as slaves." Mr. Friedman then retorted, "I don't like to hear our patriotic volunteers referred to as mercenaries. If they are mercenaries, then I, sir, am a mercenary professor, and you, sir, are a mercenary general; we are served by mercenary physicians, we use a mercenary lawyer, and we get our meat from a mercenary butcher."

STARTING GATES

How did all this debate have such a profound effect on you, Herring reader? Many of you who have made or are now making your fortunes would not have done so if the draft had been in the way. Consider Bill Gates, who in 1975 dropped out of Harvard to start Microsoft: during the draft years, young men like him who left college risked being certified as prime military meat. Computer programmers and other IT workers, who often do their best work relatively early in life, regularly drop out of college now because high-paying, interesting jobs beckon. If we still had the draft -- even a peacetime draft -- many wouldn't have that chance.

People often wonder why today's 20-somethings have such entrepreneurial spirit. One reason, I believe, is that a whole generation has grown up without the draft looming over its head. For that I thank, among others, Martin Anderson, Milton Friedman, W. Allen Wallis, and William H. Meckling. Bless them all.