

The poor remain economic military conscripts

Noel Pearson

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The travails of Democrat candidate for the US Senate Richard Blumenthal, Connecticut's attorney general, over the fabrication of his military service in Vietnam is a commonplace if typically US political controversy. Blumenthal concedes he "misspoke", having implied that he had undertaken combat duties when in fact he had served in a National Guards reserve unit that never left the US.

Blumenthal merely would be yet another in a long line of luminaries who have been less than candid about their military service: not least Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Except Blumenthal's tale prompted a devastating analysis in *The New York Times* this week by Larry Pressler, a former Republican senator from South Dakota who served in the army in Vietnam from 1966 to 1968.

In a piece titled "The Technicality Generation" Pressler's says Blumenthal's behaviour is "indicative of a broader disease in our society" and that the distrust of elites in US business and politics is "rooted in the dishonesty that surrounded the Vietnam-era draft".

Pressler writes: "The Vietnam War drove members of my generation in different directions. Some served because they believed in the war, others didn't believe in the war and protested but when drafted felt an obligation to go. Others were simply drafted. Some refused service out of principle, others out of fear, and still others because they felt taking the time to go to Vietnam would slow their careers.

"Many of those who didn't serve were helped by an inherently unfair draft. I don't fault anyone for taking advantage of the law. Where I do find fault is among those who say they were avoiding the draft because they were idealistically opposed to the war when, in fact, they mostly didn't want to make the sacrifice. The problem is that for every person who won a deferment or a spot in a special National Guard unit, someone poorer or less educated, and usually African-American, had to serve.

"Thus, many . . . knew they were using a broken (but legal) system to shirk their duty. They cloaked themselves in idealism but . . . were engaging in a charade."

Pressler's point is this: "This intellectual justification continues to this day, only now these men are among our country's leaders.

"I [observed] the best and brightest of my generation, first as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford in 1964 and then when I attended Harvard Law School after . . . Vietnam.

"In private conversations with my classmates, I was told over and over that they didn't want to serve in the military because it would hold up their careers. To the outside world, though, many would proclaim . . . they were opposed to the war and we should end all wars. Eventually they began to believe their idealism was superior to that of those who did serve. They said it was courageous to resist the draft, something that would have been true if they had actually become conscientious objectors and gone to prison.

"Too many in my generation did a deeply insidious thing. And they got away with it. Big time. Poorer people went to war. The men who didn't were able to get their head start to power.

"Many of these men who evaded service but claimed idealism lead our elite institutions. The concept of using legal technicalities to evade responsibility has been carried over to playing with derivatives, or to short-changing shareholders. Once my generation got in the habit of saying one thing and believing another, it couldn't stop.

"Bizarre outcomes abound. Many of those who avoided the war became advocates of a muscular foreign policy [overcompensating] for their unease by sending others into harm's way.

"In the coming days, I imagine we will learn more details of Mr Blumenthal's sad story. What we know, though, more generally, is much more troubling. Too many members of my generation learned to believe they could work within the law to evade basic responsibilities, cloaking their actions in idealism. It's a way of thinking that scars us to this day."

This story got me thinking about Milton Friedman, the leading liberal economist and nemesis of the Left, and his role in overturning conscription in the US.

Friedman opposed conscription as contrary to liberal principles in a series of lectures in 1956 and published his analysis in his book *Capitalism and Freedom*. His argument was in terms of freedom as

well as economics; a volunteer army was said to involve greater apparent costs, but he constructed an argument about implicit taxes involved in conscription that countered the long-standing argument that the cost of a volunteer army was prohibitive.

Friedman wrote: “The appropriate free-market arrangement is volunteer military forces ... Present arrangements are inequitable and arbitrary, seriously interfere with the freedom of young men to shape their lives, and probably are even more costly than the market alternative.”

At the time of his advocacy, from the late 1950s to the abolition of the draft under Richard Nixon in the 70s, both Democrats and Republicans supported conscription. Friedman served in the commission that advised Nixon to drop the draft, later citing this as his most satisfying achievement.

While the Left’s anti-war movement moved against conscription, the Right did the same: Ayn Rand and Friedman attacked it according to their take on liberal principles. While Democrats such as Ted Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy were advocating a fair draft, George McGovern was calling for its abolition.

I was struck by this passage from Friedman’s book: “The argument that a voluntary army would cost more simply involves a confusion of apparent with real cost. When [a person] is forced to serve, we are in effect imposing on him a tax in kind equal in value to the difference between what it would take to attract him and the military pay he actually receives. The implicit tax in kind should be added to the explicit taxes imposed on the rest of us to get the real cost of our armed forces ... It will be seen that abandoning the draft would almost surely reduce the real cost because the armed forces would then be manned by men for whom soldiering was the best available career, and hence would require the lowest sums of money to induce them to serve. Abandoning the draft might raise the apparent money cost to the government but only because it would substitute taxes in money for taxes in kind.”

So the Left found common ground with the Right to move from an armed force that was (although riddled with unfair loopholes) class-blind in conscripting servicemen to one that has moved decisively towards the lower classes. African-Americans and the great tribe of lower-class whites are now disproportionately coming home in the body bags because for them “soldiering was the best available career”.

Whereas back when there was a draft, even Bush could be conscripted, today the privileged classes are exempt.

One need not oppose the idea of lowest class people joining the armed services as the best available opportunity to put some structure and direction into lives, to see clearly the class dynamics at play here.

It is a telling example of how deceptive ideological struggles can be. By fighting the draft those concerned about inequality and injustice ended up assisting the upper classes to be exempted from military service, thus turning military service from a matter of national duty to one of liberal economics.

The real progressive position was that taken by Kennedy: advocating a fairer draft rather than its abolition.

Noel Pearson is director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership.