

Universal Military Training and the Struggle to Define American Identity During the Cold War

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On March 17, 1947, Secretary of State and former Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall appeared before a congressional committee and stated that, “we [the United States] must find some method of maintaining a sufficient military posture, one sufficiently strong without the terrific expense of a large standing Military Establishment.” At the time of Marshall’s testimony, escalating tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union made war an increasingly likely, if not inevitable, possibility. As such, Marshall and others within the government repeatedly emphasized the need for the nation to be militarily prepared in the event of a future conflict. Offering a solution to this dilemma, Marshall urged Congress to adopt a system of universal military training (UMT) within the United States whereby all males, upon turning 18, would report for up to one year of basic military instruction. Unsurprisingly, his suggestion was a controversial one.¹

From 1945 to 1952 the subject of UMT served as the focal point for a series of fierce congressional debates in which politicians, military officials, popular authors, and educators all came forward and voiced their opinions. By 1953, though, the furor surrounding UMT died off, leaving no new legislation in its wake. Most notably, Dwight D. Eisenhower, the newly elected President, distanced himself



After the death of Franklin Roosevelt, President Harry Truman took up the role of championing universal military training to provide “sufficient protection” in the event of future conflicts.

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¹ Statement by George C. Marshall in Senate Committee on Armed Services, *Universal Military Training: Hearings Before the Committee on Armed Services United States Senate*, 80th Cong., 2nd sess., Mar. 17, 18, 23–25, 29–31, and Apr. 1–3, 1948, 7.

from the concept in favor of his “New Look” policy, which relied more upon air power than the use of ground troops. Although the Cold War continued, and in some ways intensified under the Eisenhower administration, UMT was finished. This article examines the gradual demise of the program, as witnessed in the congressional testimonial records, and contends that the debates over UMT centered upon the fundamental issues of citizen responsibility and the limits of democratic government in a period of heightened fears. Thus, the mid-20th-century conversations regarding UMT were not simply a product of Cold War tensions, but actually occurred in conjunction with the emergence of the Cold War. And, as the Cold War became more of a reality in the minds of Americans, the supporters and opponents of UMT increasingly turned to historical, and even ideological, arguments to sway public opinion rather than focusing on the specific details of the plan. The UMT debate transformed into a testing ground for core American principles in a time of dangerous and protracted international tensions.²

Within the historiography, scholars have focused the majority of their energies on understanding the complex relationships between UMT, conscription, and selective service.

James Gerhardt, John Whiteclay Chambers, and Eliot Cohen all explore UMT in the context of 20th-century draft laws and provisions. However, historians continue to reference Michael Hogan’s *A Cross of Iron* as the most up-to-date and thorough treatment of Cold War-era UMT. According to Hogan, the failure of UMT represented a compromise solution in which Truman sacrificed his ideal of the citizen soldier in order to gain support for other Cold War programs. For Hogan, UMT was historically important as one widely proposed and essential component of the emerging national security state during the Truman presidency. This article extends Hogan’s analysis by examining the ideological underpinnings of Cold War UMT conversations and debates from the end of World War II to the election of Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952.³ These debates highlighted not the

² Richard M. Leighton, *History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense*, vol. 3, *Strategy, Money, and the New Look, 1953–1956* (Washington DC: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2001). For a more recent treatment of Eisenhower’s military policy, see David Jablonsky, *War by Land, Sea, and Air: Dwight Eisenhower and the Concept of Unified Command* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

³ John Whiteclay Chambers, *To Raise an Army: The Draft Comes to Modern America* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 255–56, 270–71; Eliot A. Cohen, *Citizens and Soldiers: The Dilemmas of Military Service* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 156–65; James Gerhardt, *The Draft and Public Policy: Issues in Military Manpower Procurement, 1945–1970* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1971); Michael Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945–1954* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 119–58.

impending threat of the Soviet Union, but rather the central American issue of the relationship between the individual and government. In the end, the UMT proposal failed due to an absence of public support, an apathy fueled by opponents' arguments regarding the inherent injustice of mandated military service—that such an obligation threatened the democratic notions of individual liberty.

The Presidential Case for UMT

In his final State of the Union Address, four-term President Franklin Roosevelt looked to the conclusion of World War II and articulated his vision for the postwar world. Not only did Roosevelt assure eventual victory over the Axis powers, he also urged the nation to accept greater global responsibilities after the conflict. In general, Roosevelt hoped that the United States would continue to strengthen cooperative ties with allies in order to avert future large-scale conflicts. That course of action required significant, and ongoing, investments of manpower. Accordingly, Roosevelt briefly mentioned his intention to support the passage of a universal military training program following the successful conclusion of the war. He argued that national service legislation would not only make up for shortfalls in key domestic positions, such as nurses, it would also enable the United States to honor global service commitments and to fully fulfill its role as part of a larger “organization for world peace.” Although Roosevelt had intimated his desire for a national wartime service law in a prior State of the Union Address, his 1945 speech was unique in that it marked the first time that he mentioned the possibility of implementing some form of peacetime military training legislation. However, he provided very few details as to how the program would work, and his death in April 1945 left many unanswered questions regarding his exact objectives in relation to UMT.⁴



President Harry Truman spoke before a joint session of Congress in late October 1945 detailing specifics of his plan for universal military training and the many benefits of such training for national defense.

⁴ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “State of the Union Address,” Jan. 6, 1945, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16595> (accessed Mar. 13, 2012); “Roosevelt Demands a National Service Act, Draft of Nurses and 4FS, Postwar Training; 1st Army Smashes Deeper into Belgian Bulge,” *New York Times*, Jan. 7, 1945.

In the wake of Roosevelt's passing, the idea of universal training needed a new political champion, and President Harry Truman, Roosevelt's successor, stepped ably into that role. Speaking before a joint session of Congress in late October 1945, Truman presented the specifics of a UMT plan that, in his view, would provide for "sufficient protection" in the event of future conflicts. Laying out the basic parameters of the program, the President described how all males would sign up for a year's worth of compulsory defense training upon graduating from high school or turning 18. Following the completion of that period of instruction, the men would then become part of the general reserve for six years, making them eligible for conscription in the event of war. The nation's security under that system would depend upon a "comparatively small professional force, reinforced by a well trained and effectively organized citizen reserve." Playing upon the recognition that only properly applied instruction could prepare an individual for military duty, Truman told Congress that, "We can meet the need for a trained reserve in only one way—by universal training." After explaining exactly what his version of UMT entailed, Truman then began to enumerate the many benefits of that approach to defense.⁵

In particular, the President emphasized the ways that UMT would efficiently and economically pass along key skills and values. Citing the costs of UMT versus those of maintaining a large regular military, he noted that universal training would save the nation money in the long term. Simply put, the smaller the regular army, the fewer funds required. Taking that argument one step further, Truman also explained how the program could elevate the financial footing of many Americans by providing them with a unique set of marketable skills. The nation would only benefit, Truman declared, by encouraging young men to develop their physical and mental capabilities. As his message to Congress made clear, Truman viewed military service as a means of bettering both individuals and the United States as a whole. Arguing against the notion that peacetime conscription "violates traditional American concepts of liberty and democracy," he instead claimed that compulsory training would, in fact, school young men in "the ideals of responsible citizenship." In the end, Truman's hope was that UMT would produce a democratic fighting force characterized by equality and inclusivity. Such an army would be both feared and respected by rival nations, as a demonstration of American progress and potential.⁶

⁵ Harry S. Truman, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Universal Military Training," Oct. 23, 1945, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=12309> (accessed Mar. 12, 2012). For a brief background on the emergence of Truman's plan, see Hogan, *Cross of Iron*, 122–25.

⁶ Truman, "Address Before a Joint Session," 1945.

Congress Considers UMT

Even with Truman publicly supporting the adoption of UMT, not everyone was convinced. Indeed, many of the congressional conversations that followed focused on the financial feasibility of implementing and maintaining a universal training program. Of particular concern was how UMT would coincide with congressional desires to curb government spending and return to prewar force levels. To allay these fears and to provide additional information, members of the Truman administration appeared before Congress and answered questions during one of the earliest hearings on the proposed UMT bill in November 1945. Within this extended conversation, a memorable exchange between Representative Charles Clason of Massachusetts and Secretary of War Robert Patterson stands out as illustrative of the economic tensions at play.

Clason offered the opening salvo by referring to the cost of UMT as the “old question.” He then asked Patterson, “Where are you going to get the money?” After all, he reminded Patterson, a great majority of congressmen were “worried about deficit spending” as “we have been in the red for 14 years.” The most immediate problem with the bill in Clason’s mind was its potential to overextend the federal budget to the point of collapse. Patterson responded to Clason’s concerns with a handful of standard economic arguments favoring the implementation of UMT. To begin with, he asked Clason and other congressmen to remember the general unpreparedness of the military at the start of World War II. Avoiding the repetition of that problem, Patterson contended, required a change in U.S. military training approaches. To pacify those concerned with the financial impact of such measures, Patterson then directly compared the overall cost of compulsory training with that of the total dollar amount spent during World War II. In doing so, he hoped to prove that advance preparation would save money in the long term.⁷



Admiral Chester Nimitz provided a written statement to Congress stressing the likelihood of attacks on the U.S. homeland in future wars, and that preparedness was essential for survival.

⁷ House Committee on Military Affairs, *Universal Military Training: Hearings Before the Committee on Military Affairs on H.R. 515*, 79th Cong., 1st Sess., Nov. 8, 13–16, 19–21, 26–30, Dec. 3, 6, 7, 10–14, and 17–19, 1945, 25.

By implying that the security of the nation outweighed the price of any training program, Patterson employed a tactic that, while not novel, was effective. UMT advocates, in a similar fashion as Patterson, consistently capitalized on the fact that most people looked to the early days of World War II as a period characterized by the inefficient use of manpower and money. Claiming that the United States could ill afford to be caught unprepared in the event of a future military conflict, UMT supporters argued that in its simplest form the program would decrease the amount of time needed to move large numbers of men onto the front lines. Echoing that belief and emphasizing the terrifying possibility of an enemy invasion, Admiral Chester Nimitz, in a written statement to the committee, predicted that the United States had “fought the last war in which our homeland will be spared the violence of our enemies.” Focusing on the specific threats due to air power and the increasing destructiveness of military weapons, Nimitz urged Congress to consider the UMT proposal. In the event of another war, he asserted, Americans “must be prepared to resist with maximum power in a minimum of time.” Linking preparedness with survival, Nimitz’s words harnessed the specter of homeland assault and, in the process, directly appealed to the emotions of postwar Americans. UMT advocates hoped, and believed, that questions of cost should fade in importance when placed alongside discussions of basic survival.⁸

The Public Debates UMT

However, it would be a mistake to assert that the UMT debates were solely the property of politicians and their representatives as the early 1940s also witnessed the development of a healthy public conversation on the issue. Within these national dialogues, concerns about protection and safety appeared alongside questions regarding the changing nature of warfare. Simply put, many Americans believed that the onset of the atomic age had rendered large armies, so necessary in the World Wars, obsolete. The image of the nuclear battlefield and its missiles, aircraft, and small units of security troops in mop-up operations pervaded the cultural mindset. For example, a 1947 *New York Times* article put forth a list of reasons why UMT was not practical. Specifically, the author noted that the United States was unlikely to be successfully invaded due to its geographic location; nuclear weapons placed a premium on offensive actions; and nuclear warfare precluded the need for a large army. According to this logic, only a wasteful government would spend

⁸ Statement by Admiral Chester Nimitz, House Select Committee on Postwar Military Policy, *Universal Military Training: Hearings Before the Select Committee on Postwar Military Policy on H.R. 465*, 79th Cong., 1st sess., June 4–9, 11–16, and 19, 1945, 529.

money in order to train a population for something that they would most likely never need, the physical protection afforded by substantial troop numbers.⁹

In addition to assessments of usefulness, the public UMT debates also forced an examination of the relationship between UMT proposals and democratic principles and practices. Within this context, noted military training critic Reverend Robert Graham used history as a tool to describe how UMT would further destabilize American values. Graham's articles and editorials appeared in a wide variety of newspapers and magazines. In 1945, he penned and published a work that encapsulated his, and others, initial objections to UMT. Wielding history as his weapon-of-choice, Graham pointed out that Americans have generally shown a willingness to adopt selective service in times of crisis, but they have also sought to end conscription upon the conclusion of the period of emergency. For Graham, the adoption of selective service during the First World War represented one example of this pattern. As such, the mere possibility of a Soviet threat did not warrant implementing a widespread military instruction program. Moreover, Graham addressed those individuals who argued for a link between mid-20th-century UMT programs and Colonial/Revolutionary War-era militia systems. He stated that, "the concept of the 'citizen army' (Washington's "well-regulated militia") is not identical with or even necessarily inclusive of the idea of universal training." According to Graham's interpretation, the historical comparison fell flat as colonial militiamen acted out of a concern for the local whereas UMT forces would possess no such impetus. Not merely the opinions of one outspoken individual, Graham's writings were significant in that they foreshadowed the general direction of the UMT debates heading into the late 1940s and early 1950s.¹⁰



George Zook, president of the American Council on Education, believed that a U.S. military training program would hinder efforts to educate those Americans who lacked basic skills such as literacy.

⁹ Hanson Baldwin, "UMTs Value Weighed," *New York Times*, May 4, 1947.

¹⁰ Robert Graham, "Universal Military Training in Modern History," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 241, *Universal Military Training and National Security* (Sept. 1945), 13; Chambers, *To Raise an Army*, 13–39. Chambers discussed the general evolution away from both the militias and militia duty, but noted that even in the industrializing North, "lawmakers had not abandoned the concept of the general militia nor relinquished the states' authority to compel militia service."

In a surprising turn of events, educators mounted some of the fiercest assaults upon Truman's training proposal. They worried that the implementation of UMT would limit the potential development of intellectual progression and democratic instruction in America. George Zook, president of the American Council on Education (ACE), published a scathing critique of UMT in his organization's journal. Following a listing format, Zook presented evidence that a U.S. training program would hinder efforts to educate those Americans who lacked basic skills such as literacy. As an example of the dangers of widespread conscription, he pointed to the over 300,000 illiterate men drafted into the Army during World War II. According to Zook, American youths would be better served, in a time of peace, by learning essential life tools instead of military tactics. The educators whom Zook represented also took issue with the possibility of an overlap between the technical training provided by contemporary secondary education and a potential UMT program. Admittedly, a strong national defense required the availability of able-bodied men who possessed the technical skills required to operate wartime industry, but it was Zook's sincere hope that such training would remain the purview of professional teachers rather than the "prerogative of military authorities alone." It is important to note that in the battle to maintain control over the education of America's youth, the ACE was not alone in its concerns regarding UMT. A 1947 survey of professional groups revealed that nearly 75 percent of educators opposed any sort of military training program.¹¹

Encouraged by the widespread support of their constituents, various educational groups pushed for the chance to present their concerns before Congress. They sought the audience and legitimacy that only a congressional hearing could provide. In June 1947, the National Education Agency (NEA) received such an opportunity. During that month, a House subcommittee convened to investigate complaints by NEA members that the War Department had used public funds to promote the adoption of UMT legislation. Not mincing words, Dr. Ralph McDonald, an NEA official, testified before Congress that he felt as if the War Department was attempting to "foist upon the American people a worn-out system that has brought the destruction of freedom in so many countries." Within his statement, McDonald employed the common tactic of referring specifically to Germany in order to establish a connection between UMT and destructive militarism. After all, in the postwar period many Americans greatly feared that the country could become like Germany, and they reacted to all defense

¹¹ American Council on Education, "Universal Military Training," *Some Current Issues in Education*, eds. Francis J. Brown and J. Roland Kufus 12 (July 1948), 3; George Zook, "Universal Military Training" in *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors*, vol. 33, no. 2 (Summer 1947), 294–97.

legislation accordingly. In a fashion similar to UMT, the creation of the Joint Chiefs and the Department of Defense was also greeted with public skepticism and anxiety.¹²

In addition to fears of militarism, McDonald voiced a concern that the implementation of UMT would encourage a dangerous expansion of the federal government into areas of education generally regulated by the states. He posed the question: What if the federal government chose to intrude upon the states' ability to determine school curriculum? And, in response he proclaimed, "if there is the slightest danger of the schools of this country coming under centralized control, then that, in my judgment, would be a matter of far greater concern . . . to those who believe in democracy." Thus, McDonald framed the debate over UMT as a battle between state versus federal control over not only the military but education as well. He no doubt expressed a concern held by many within the education community that universal training on the part of the military would ultimately become a threat to freedom and liberty.¹³

Democracy, History, and UMT

In a similar fashion as educators, conservatives within the government and general public also presented the argument that UMT constituted a threat to democratic ideals. As early as 1945, Ohio Senator Robert Taft spoke out against the proposed training plan in a public speech at the Gettysburg memorial. Taft not only attacked Truman's proposal as wasteful, he assailed the idea as un-American. It was quite possible, he warned, that compulsory service might eventually "be used to fasten upon us every kind of regulation,

¹² Statement of Dr. Ralph McDonald, House Subcommittee on Publicity and Propaganda, *Investigation of War Department Publicity and Propaganda in Relation to Universal Military Training: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Publicity and Propaganda of the Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments*, 80th Cong., 1st sess., June 20 and July 16, 1947, 10-1; Senate, *Universal Military Training*, 1948, 726, 881 886, 890. Other educational groups who spoke out against UMT in previous congressional hearings included the Association of American Colleges, the American Association of University Professors, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the National Congress of Parents and Teachers; The two best works on the creation of the Defense Department are Demetrios Caraley, *The Politics of Military Unification: A Study of Conflict and the Policy Process* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), and Paul Hammond, *Organizing for Defense: The American Military Establishment in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

¹³ Statement of Dr. Ralph McDonald, House, *Investigation of War Department Publicity and Propaganda*, 1947, 15. For example, several religious organizations emphatically stated their resistance to any type of military training legislation. In a letter to the *New York Times*, the Reverend Woodbury Stowell claimed that "the issue was debated in the Constitutional Convention. All forms of peacetime impressments, conscription or compulsion have been taboo from 1776 until now." Declaring those who advocated such ideas to be agents of militarism, Stowell went on to ask if universal military training was even constitutional. See, Rev. Woodbury S. Stowell, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, Aug. 7, 1947.

price control for business, wage control for labor, production control for farmers.”¹⁴ For the fiscally conservative Taft, such a federal intrusion into the affairs of the market economy was unfathomable and, more importantly, antithetical to traditional American values. After all, if the purpose of war was “to maintain here at home the freedom which was won in 1776,” what good would it do to sacrifice liberty in the process of preparing for conflict? According to this interpretation, the danger of UMT lay within its potential threat to democratic government. Forcing individuals to serve their country came at a cost as, “government by the people . . . can only exist if the individual is free to rule the state and if he is not ruled by the state.”¹⁵ Drawing upon postwar fears of imperialism, Taft closed his Gettysburg comments by asking his audience to envision an America transformed by UMT legislation into a totalitarian nation.¹⁶

Faced with such fervent opposition, the advocates of Truman’s UMT program launched a series of counterattacks in which they sought to re-emphasize the obligations of citizenship. Part of this strategy involved placing military training alongside other duties that individuals living in a democratic society were expected to perform. In his testimony before the House Committee on Armed Services in June 1947, Edmund Walsh, vice president of Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service, listed armed service next to “paying taxes” and “obeying the existing laws” as an understood civic obligation. In the aftermath of two world wars and the looming threat of a third growing daily, he opined that the time had come for men and women to contribute more to the nation. Daniel Poling, a member of President Truman’s Advisory Commission on Universal Military Training, echoed Walsh’s sentiments and contended that UMT was only un-American and undemocratic if “universal education and universal taxes are.” It was his belief that the blanket nature of the proposed training bill made it all the more democratic in nature. After all, protecting one’s “home and community” was a critical aspect of civic virtue dating back to the Colonial period. Poling even went so far as to remind his opponents

¹⁴ Clarence E. Wunderlin, Jr., ed., *The Papers of Robert A. Taft*, vol. 3, 1945–1948 (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2003), 51; “Taft Charges Secret-Drive on Peace Draft,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 31, 1945.

¹⁵ Wunderlin, *The Papers of Robert A. Taft* vol. 3, 49–54; Hogan, *Cross of Iron*, 121–2. As Hogan notes, many UMT opponents felt that the money spent on training America’s youth might be better spent by increasing the size and resources of the Army Air Force (after 1947, the U.S. Air Force).

¹⁶ Democratic Senator William J. Fulbright would refer to a similar argument in decrying the dangers of Soviet totalitarianism, demonstrating that Cold War rhetoric often transcended party lines. For an example, see Robert L. Ivie, “Metaphor and the Rhetorical Invention of Cold War ‘Idealists,’” *Cold War Rhetoric: Strategy, Metaphor, and Ideology*, eds. Martin J. Medhurst, Robert L. Ivie, Philip Wander, and Robert L. Scott (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997), 113. Indeed, while specific references to Japan and Germany occasionally appeared within his speech, Taft, more often than not, chose the broader term totalitarianism to define his ideological opposition to the UMT legislation and demonstrate how antithetical such a program was to traditional American culture.

that George Washington had advocated for an early form of UMT. It was in this way that UMT's supporters marshaled America's historical narrative for their own purposes. In light of the "us versus them" Cold War mentality, universal training would either pass or perish based upon general assessments as to its "Americanness."¹⁷

As tensions with the Soviet Union escalated during the late 1940s, even representatives from the armed forces began to frame their pro-UMT arguments around the defense of republican ideals as opposed to military practicalities. They hoped to explain the benefits of universal training by drawing attention to the reciprocal nature of American society. Essentially, a citizen received certain privileges in exchange for performing particular responsibilities owed to the state. When taken in the context of the Cold War, the appeal of molding generations of productive and "good" citizens was tangible. At a time when Americans increasingly came to define themselves by what they were not (i.e., communists), UMT offered the unique opportunity to reinforce positive citizenship en masse. Indeed, Secretary of the Army Kenneth Royall testified that he believed that "a young man under universal military training has an equal and perhaps a little better chance to be a good boy than if he is not." Royall's statement was indicative of the singular nature of the UMT debates during the early Cold War period. Not only was UMT an avenue towards efficient military mobilization, it was a means of combating Communism from an ideological standpoint through the creation of good American citizens. Moreover, playing out the battle for public opinion on the field of patriotic sentiment helped to steer attention away from the increasingly muddled nature of the bill itself and the fact that its estimated cost continued to rise.¹⁸

Despite these challenges, in 1948 the UMT bill appeared to finally have a chance at passage. Congress approved The National Security Act in the previous year, and

¹⁷ Statement by Edmund Walsh, House Committee on Armed Services, *Full Committee Hearings on Universal Military Training*, June 11, 1947 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1947), 4195; Daniel A. Poling, Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, June 29, 1947. This marked a significant departure from earlier lines of argument regarding UMT, particularly those seen during the preparedness movement prior to the First World War.

¹⁸ For a brief discussion of the "othering" of the Cold War, see Philip Wander, "Political Rhetoric and the Un-American Tradition," *Cold War Rhetoric: Strategy, Metaphor, and Ideology*, 185–202. Maj. Gen. Jacob Devers declared that "under a democratic system of government, such as we enjoy, every man, woman, and child who receives the blessings of our way of life has a responsibility to take whatever action that lies within his power to guarantee that the system under which we have prospered for so many years is perpetuated for the enjoyment of future generations." Statement by Maj. Gen. Jacob Devers, *House Investigation of War Department Publicity and Propaganda in Relation to Universal Military Training*, 1947, 57; Statement by Kenneth Royall, *House Investigation of War Department Publicity and Propaganda in Relation to Universal Military Training*, 1947, 17. For a theoretical discussion of the potential benefits of military service, see Ronald Krebs, "A School for the Nation: How Military Service Does not Build Nations, and How it Might," *National Security* 28: 4 (Spring 2004): 85–124.

the Truman administration hoped to capitalize on that victory. As such, the Senate Armed Services Committee initiated hearings in order to discuss the pending service legislation. Within this conversation, the historical positioning of UMT emerged as a particular source of controversy. For example, it quickly became clear that no one could agree as to whether or not 20th-century compulsory training programs could accurately claim Colonial American lineages. That debate reached a fever pitch after the committee heard a prepared statement by the noted historian Charles Beard, who at 73 was unable to be present. Beard, whom the chairman of the Armed Services committee called “one of the greatest historians of all time,” made abundantly clear his opposition to any UMT legislation. In the statement, Beard began by claiming that the proposed system would ultimately “violate every liberty to which our nation has been dedicated since the foundation of the Republic.” Additionally, he evinced concern that UMT would place an inordinate burden on the lower classes. While the rich potentially bought their way out, the program “would enslave the sons of plain people—farmers, industrial workers, and all other laborers who toil with their hands for a living.” That argument, unsurprisingly, dovetailed nicely with Beard’s published works evaluating the economic interests of Revolutionary-era leaders. However, in the case of UMT, the government would injure the most vulnerable Americans in two ways: by depriving them of their sons as workers and by increasing the likelihood that these same boys would be sent off to war. As such, Beard called for all citizens to oppose to militarization of American society.¹⁹

UMT, in Beard’s opinion, would not only deprive individuals of liberty, it would also lead to the subordination of all men and women to the military’s needs and whims. Once unleashed, it would no longer be possible to contain, the “menacing impacts of universal military service on every branch of civil life, on all civil liberties, on all the virtues that make America precious to the people.” Admitting the historical role of the militiaman, Beard wrote that, yes, the nation’s founders had accepted the “universal liability” of citizens to serve in defense of the nation, but universal conscription was another beast altogether. He argued for a specific distinction between the “liability” for service and a forced obligation to perform such service in the absence of a specific need or threat. And, a series of poor decisions could easily place the United States on the same trajectory as totalitarian Germany. After all, Germany utilized conscription laws prior to the First World War. Beard then described a scenario in which the military caste controlled men’s lives not only during the initial period of training but also well

¹⁹ Prepared Statement by Dr. Charles Beard, House, *Universal Military Training*, 1948, 1053. In a fashion similar to other opponents, Beard questioned whether UMT was an acceptable form of defense in the age of atomic weaponry.

beyond. The totalitarian effects of German conscription resulted in men being forced to report their every movement to the government, to open military records to potential employers, and finally to remain as a member of the reserves until the age of 45. To the opponents of UMT, including Beard, such results were unthinkable in a free society.²⁰

Unfortunately for supporters of the bill, Truman's officials proved unable to craft a set of convincing historical arguments to effectively counter claims such as those made by Beard. In fact, the administration almost immediately retreated into a defensive stance. Reference, for example, the exchange that took place between Senator Harley Kilgore of West Virginia and Secretary of State Marshall. Kilgore asked Marshall if "it is not a fact that our past history has been one of hating any idea of military preparedness in time of peace?" To which Marshall replied that the United States tended to historically "fail to prepare in time of peace, and . . . have had an aversion to doing so." Through this statement, Marshall missed an opportunity to draw a connection between the idea of civic obligation and the long-standing militia history of the United States. However, he was not alone in this omission as many UMT supporters, particularly those with military backgrounds, often hesitated to use the militia tradition as a philosophical base from which to garner support for universal training. Indeed, making a militia-based argument in defense of the legislation might have given the bill an air of historical legitimacy, but it could have also backfired by drawing parallels to an outmoded system of local defense.²¹

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1054; This attitude towards an omnipresent government is also exemplified by Dr. Alexander Guerry, president of Sewanee University, who was reported as saying that through UMT the "Federal Government and the military would extend their control over the lives of the people and gradually take away all freedom." Benjamin Fine, "219 College Heads Vote Against UMT," *New York Times*, Jan. 14, 1948.

²¹ Senate, *Universal Military Training*, 80th Cong., 2nd sess., 23. The National Security Act of 1947 created the Department of Defense. While it did not go as far as many Army officials hoped, it represented the culmination of attempts to unify the services. The act also allowed UMT advocates within the military to focus on their own goal of gaining support for training legislation. Omar Bradley, *The Collected Writings of General Omar N. Bradley: Speeches, 1945–1949*, Vol. 1 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1949), 479. See, for example, Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783–1802* (New York: The Free Press, 1975); Lawrence Delbert Cress, *Citizens in Arms: The Army and the Militia in American Society to the War of 1812* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Jerry Cooper, *The Rise of the National Guard: The Evolution of the American Militia, 1865–1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997). Regardless, Senator Kilgore was mistaken in his assumption. It was not military preparedness that the revolutionary generation despised. It was the thought of a large standing army that operated at the behest of a distant federal government. Regular militia musters and drills, whatever quality they may have been, indicated an acceptance of some degree of military preparedness. Indeed, one of the most vociferous opponents of a standing army, George Mason, wondered "When, against a regular and disciplined army, yeomanry are the only defence,—yeomanry, unskillful and unarmed,—what chance is there for preserving freedom?" Mason clearly believed that the citizens must be trained in order to effectively resist against an opposing force. For most revolutionary leaders, there was no ambivalence about the need for military preparedness. Jonathan, Elliot, ed., *The Debates on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, vol. 3 (New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), 379–80.

In spite of the constant pressure by the Truman administration to pass UMT, and even with a foreign policy scare in Czechoslovakia, the 1948 hearings went nowhere and ended with Congress tabling the bill yet again. Although popular polls indicated consistent public support for the program, fierce opposition both from within Congress and on the part of private interest groups prevented a vote on UMT.²² Additionally, fiscal conservatives within the government continued to decry the potential cost of universal training. They also began to point to the Marshall Plan as justification for monitoring military spending. Moreover, when Congress passed an appropriations bill for a seventy-group Air Force, critics claimed that this investment obviated any need for UMT.²³

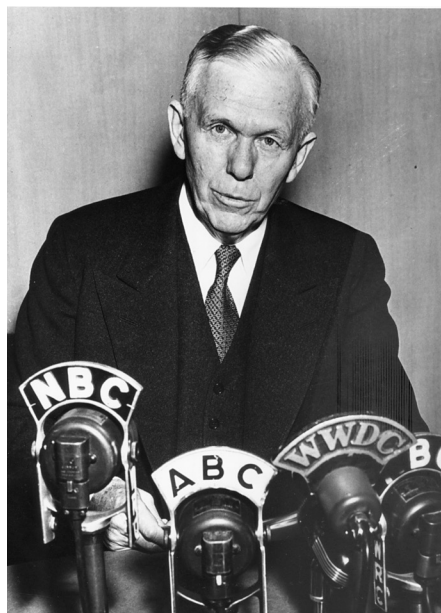
Korea, Eisenhower, and the Demise of UMT

Two years later, the outbreak of the Korean War prompted a renewed interest in universal training. Citing the events in Korea and recent “world developments,” the Senate Armed Services Committee held a brief two-day hearing to explore the costs and benefits associated with the implementation of UMT. Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson and Omar Bradley, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, both appeared and argued in favor of a training program. In particular, they warned that the United States might find itself in a manpower crisis if the government did not put certain measures in place. Their fears were based upon the fact that, during the first six months of the Korean War, many officials within the Departments of Defense and State speculated that the invasion of South Korea was merely a feint instigated by the Soviet Union to draw attention away from Europe. Johnson stated that in the event of a wider conflict, the military buildup prior to the outbreak of hostilities in Korea was not sufficient to “meet

²² Hedwig Ylvisaker, “Public Opinion Toward Compulsory Peacetime Military Training,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 241, *Universal Military Training and National Security* (Sept. 1945), 87. Between 1938 and 1955 there were 35 Gallup polls taken focusing on UMT with nearly three-fourths of the respondents claiming to be in favor of some type of universal training program. The lowest number of positive responses appeared in 1938 when only 38 percent of those polled indicated their support. By the time the next UMT poll was taken in 1942, nearly 66 percent of respondents approved of some type of universal training. Coincidentally, the highest number of respondents in favor of UMT appeared in late 1950, one month after the outbreak of the Korean War, when 78 percent of those polled indicated their approval. American Institute of Public Opinion, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935–1971*, vol. 1, 1935–1948 (New York: Random House, 1972), 129, 361, 418, 463, 471, 476, 483, 490, 501, 509, 516, 539, 541, 544, 546, 549, 626, 653, 661, 700, 723; American Institute of Public Opinion, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935–1971*, vol. 2, 1949–1958 (New York: Random House, 1972), 794, 932, 934, 951, 970, 984, 1034, 1046, 1120, 1149, 1156, 1268, 1302, 1311, 1394.

²³ Hogan, *Cross of Iron*, 145, 155–6; Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 375–76.

the immediate threat.” Echoing Johnson’s sentiments, Bradley testified that universal training represented “one of the greatest deterrents” for war against the United States. It is also likely that Bradley’s support of UMT reflected the Truman administration’s growing desire to pursue a more determined policy of containment towards the Soviet Union. For example, NSC-68, formulated at the start of 1950, emphasized the importance of employing both military pressure as well as economic measures to fight communist expansion. And, Bradley’s prepared statement hinted at future increases in defense appropriation requests. He noted that if Congress enacted the UMT program, “it must be with the realization that we must also have the necessary equipment on hand to make quick use of our trained manpower.” As Bradley’s comments suggest, UMT advocates participating in the Korean War-era hearings focused their energies on presenting the military details of the plan, thus shifting the emphasis away from talk of model citizenry and democracy. According to Bradley, the only justification for UMT was “national defense.” Any other benefits that stemmed from the training, he claimed, “are byproducts.”²⁴



In his testimony before Congress, Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall chose to emphasize the place of universal training within the nation’s history—that the military had always relied upon reserves.

The following year, with the outcome of the Korean War uncertain, George Marshall once again testified before a Senate hearing regarding universal training proposals. Although he remained steadfastly in favor of UMT, Marshall acknowledged that the bill “presented almost insurmountable difficulties at the present moment.” However, he urged

²⁴ Senate Committee on Armed Services, *A Bill to Provide for the Common Defense by Establishing a Universal Training Program, and for Other Purposes*, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., Aug. 22 and 23, 1950, 25. Despite the seemingly obvious mobilization problems apparent in the Korean draw-up, Johnson still found it necessary to address allegations that UMT was not in accordance with traditional American principles. Seeking to allay such fears, Johnson testified that the “only sound democratic base” for mobilization was UMT. Senate, *A Bill to Provide for the Common Defense*, 1950, 26; Statement of General Omar Bradley, Senate, *A Bill to Provide for the Common Defense*, 1950, 33–35.

the Senate to consider the bill within the broader context of national security. Like Bradley, Marshall no longer advocated the adoption of UMT on the basis of civic improvement. Instead, he chose to emphasize the place of universal training within the nation's history. In his opening statement to Congress, he testified that "The concept of universal military service and training reaches back more than 150 years. The father of His [sic] country recognized the need for a citizens' army based on reserves of trained manpower. He asked Congress to approve a plan for universal training. In every national emergency since that time, our military efforts have been hampered, our very national existence has been imperiled by the lack of trained reserves."²⁵ Had this been three years earlier, Marshall may have pursued this line of reasoning a bit further. As it stood, however, he was nearing retirement for the final time and undoubtedly felt the strain of overseeing the Korean War as Secretary of Defense. He limited his testimony to a single morning, and his appearance lasted for less than an hour. Through his brief comments, Marshall managed to once again emphasize the military necessity of UMT, thus reinforcing Bradley's and Johnson's statements from the prior year.

However, the support of these formidable governmental figures only served to slow, not stop, the demise of Truman's UMT bill. The Korean War had resurrected the training debate, yet it would also tip the scales against its implementation. In the aftermath of the conflict, the army moved further away from the massive force structures of World War II and instead prepared for Korean-style limited engagements. In addition, universal training lost its most vocal supporter when President Truman concluded his second term in office and stepped out of the public sphere. His successor, Dwight Eisenhower, possessed a long and complicated history in relation to UMT. Although he had testified in favor of the program in 1945, his support was never wholehearted.²⁶ In a diary entry dated November 12, 1946, Eisenhower described his skepticism towards several War Department proposals, including UMT. He mused that the War Department seemed "committed to certain things that seem to me to be outside the realm of

²⁵ Senate Preparedness Committee of the Committee on Armed Services, *Universal Military Training and Service Act of 1951: Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services*, 82nd Cong., 1st sess., Jan. 10–12, 15–19, 22, 24–26, 29–30, and Feb. 2, 1951, 28; Statement by George Marshall, Senate, *Universal Military Training and Service Act of 1951*, 1951, 27. Despite his earlier retirement from public service in January 1949, Marshall agreed to take over for Louis Johnson in September 1950.

²⁶ House, *Universal Military Training*, 1945, 59–88. In a 1950 letter to then-Defense Secretary Louis Johnson, Eisenhower coyly noted the distinction between universal "service" and universal "training." Dwight Eisenhower, *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*, vol. X, *Columbia University* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1984), 1240.

logic and practicality.” Universal training, he wrote, “is costly,” and possesses “no immediate usefulness in emergency except in its peacetime effect in filling up the national guard.” Thus, as early as 1946, Eisenhower appeared to find serious faults with the usage of UMT as a defense program. And, in the years following, the adoption of his “New Look” policy ensured that in the event of a large-scale attack against America or its interests, the retaliation would rest not with a mass of trained reservists, but rather with nuclear weapons.²⁷

Congress, fearful of alienating the voting public and sensing a lack of support from the White House, decided to ultimately discard the idea of UMT. And, in March 1952, the House came to a 236 to 162 final vote against the bill. In UMT’s place, Congress retained the option of selective service. This eventually led to the unpopular Vietnam War draft, a program that pushed the idea of the conscript army entirely out of public favor. Indeed, to quell that rising discontent, General Creighton Abrams called for the creation of an all-volunteer army. That force placed a premium on professionalism and specialized training and became, to a great extent, the model for today’s U.S. military.²⁸

In the end, the UMT debates of the late 1940s and early 1950s both constituted and reflected the values and fears of Cold War America. Men and women during that period lived in a state of constant uncertainty. If they believed that war would come, they remained unclear as to how it would be fought. Would it be, as *Time* magazine proclaimed in 1947, a “push button war,” or would it require a mass mobilization similar to the two previous World Wars?²⁹ Average citizens, Congress, and even the military seemed unable to agree. In this context, the implementation of UMT appeared to offer a potential solution to the nation’s defense dilemma, yet it also conjured up American’s deepest anxieties and concerns as to the

²⁷ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The Eisenhower Diaries*, ed. Robert H. Ferrell (New York: Norton, 1981), 137–9. Even in 1946 the future President already appeared to be gauging proposals based upon their overall cost. Eisenhower would continue this trend of budget conscious planning throughout his two terms as President. See, Weigley, *Towards an American Army: Military Thought from Washington to Marshall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 252.

²⁸ John Fisher, “House Defeats Truman UMT: Bill is Dealt Death Blow by 236–162 Vote,” *Chicago Tribune*, Mar. 5, 1952. More importantly, opponents reflected both sides of the political spectrum as liberals claimed the idea to be un-American and conservatives decried it as a waste of resources. Hogan, *Cross of Iron*, 120–1; Bernard Rostker, *I Want You!: The Evolution of the All-Volunteer Force* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2006).

²⁹ “Push Button War,” *Time*, July 23, 1947, 72. For a similar discussion, see Joseph and Stewart Alsop, “Are We Ready for a Push-Button War?” *Saturday Evening Post*, Sept. 6, 1947, 18–19, 91–96, 98–99, 101–4.

fundamental nature of democracy with its reciprocal relationship between the individual and government. Questions swirled around the proposal, including: Can a free society compel people to undergo military training? And, as United States citizens struggled to find the answers, they also began to reaffirm and clarify their unique national identity, distinct and apart from the totalitarianism practiced elsewhere.

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