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Fundamental Education

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REAGAN EXTENDS DRAFT REGISTRATION

When he was a candidate for the presidency, Ronald Reagan repeatedly denounced Jimmy Carter's draft registration as both ineffective and immoral, and promised to put an end to it if he were elected. For just under a year after he took office, he allowed the draft-registration program to continue. On January 7, 1982, he announced he was extending it indefinitely.

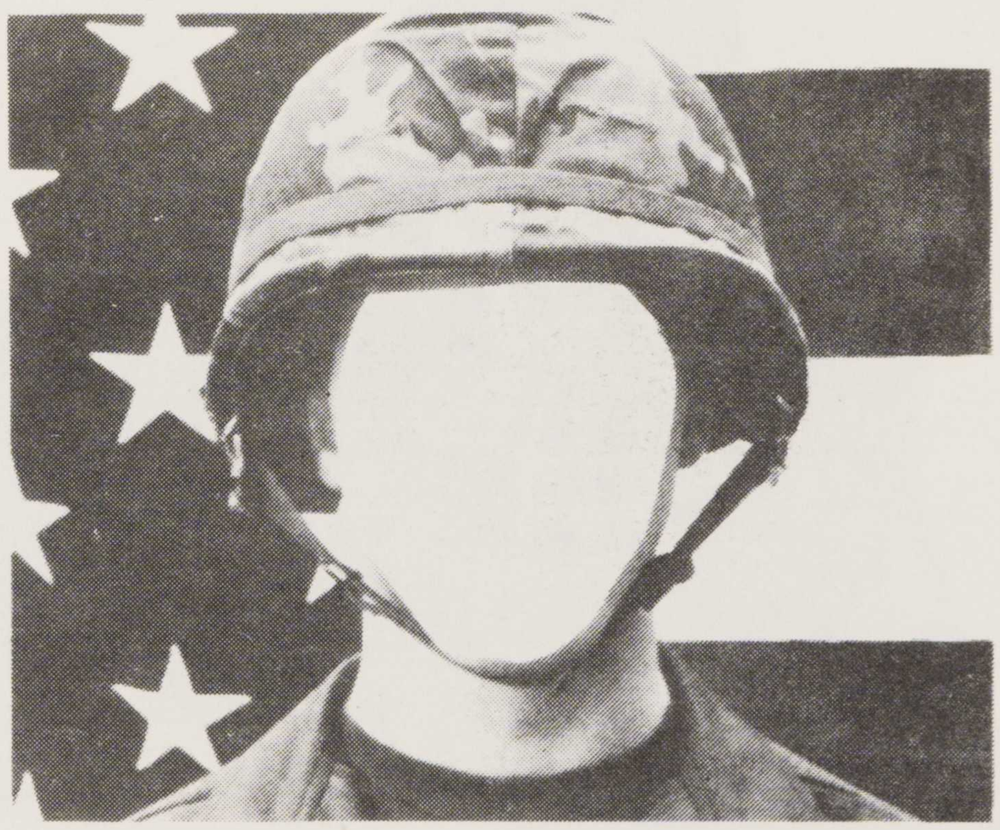
What's going on here?

A number of things. A candidate for governmental office is free to imagine that there are substantive issues of public policy to debate. A holder of governmental office knows that his sole function is to enforce the government's position within the social system.

Candidate Reagan could argue reasonably that draft registration did not serve the military purpose that was claimed for it. President Reagan -- confronted with the spectacle of the suppression of workers' movement in Poland and rightly seeing on which side of such a struggle the American state's interests lie -- must, by his position, recognize that the state interest that he is the instrument of is best served in such a situation by a reminder to the mass of the people of this country who is master hero, who is servant. In the American bourgeois ideological context, this in an affirmation of the mystical notion that the " people" collectively are sovereign, the individual subordinate. It is with this majestic idea that bourgeois society would challenge state capitalism of the Soviet kind.

It is important to remember always that intentions mean nothing. They mean nothing because they are equivalent, particularly the intentions of political leaders, all of which are absolutely determined by the ideological systems of which they are prisoners. Ronald Reagan cuts taxed (sort of), cuts social welfare spending, increases military spending, crushes PATCO, extends draft registration -- for the ultimate good and prosperity of the American people. He really means it; his intentions are benign. Leonid Brezhnev sends tanks into Prague, makes deals with Western corporations and governments for grain and high-tech equipment, puts Jews and scientists in labor camps and psychiatric hosipitals, and leans on Comrade Jaruzelski to lean on Polish workers and get them to stop asking that they be allowed to manage their own affairs -- for the good and prosperity of the workers of Russia and of the world through the socialist program. *He* really means it; his intentions are benign. Adolf Hitler invades all of Germany's neighboring states, puts slave labor at the service of the giant German industrial concerns, and sets about systematically exterminating the Jewish, Gypsy, and homosexual populations of Europe -- for the good and prosperity and glory of the German nation. He really meant it; *his* intentions were benign.

In Reagan's extension of draft registration, as in everything that happens in the political sphere, it is a great mistake to look for evil intentions or conspiracies in high political places. To do so is to overlook and obscure the material determinants of what is actually going on. Reagan genuinely is a genial slob who doesn't mean anyone any particualr harm. To denounce him individually for an act of supposed infamy is practically to ignore the fact that it is the rooted interest of bourgeois society to require a ritual of submission of the individual to the "people", particualrly when that " people" and the economic organization that created them are challenged by outside events.

The immediate response, then, should not be any sort of high-minded indignation, but a simple refusal to go along. And it should not be imagined that refusing to register for the draft that can in any way really hamper the state's ability to raise a conscript army. It would be naive in the extreme to suppose that the state does not -- with its great batteries of computers -- already possess the means to assemble the information that registration is ostensibly intended to provide (and it wouldn't take any six weeks either). The point of draft registration is to get people to submit in a formal ritual to state authority, one by one. But we simply won't.

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