

## Correspondence

### “Conscription and Public Service”

To the Editors: That many good men continue to advocate renewed and broadened conscription in the United States is not surprising; ingenious minds can always be found to labor passionately in the service of bad ideas. Often, it seems, the worst ideas call forth the most sweeping and clever defenders.

Thus it is with the new conscription debate. Those who favor a national commitment to forced labor toss about unprovable generalizations (“the current military is intended to be mercenary”); they obfuscate important questions (hinting, for example, that there are profound philosophical pitfalls in assuming that voluntary means voluntary); they put quotations around the word, implying subtly that service-by-choice is not; and they poison the well by reminding their readers that the volunteer army was, after all, *Nixon’s* idea. All these ideas are found, for example, in Wilson Carey McWilliams’s “Conscription and Public Service” in *Worldview* (Excursus, June). Such tac-

tics would be cause for flunking a high school debate student. In discussions of so serious a matter as this one they are inexcusable.

But still more alarming is the premise of such arguments. That the state exercises, and of right ought to exercise, sweeping powers over the harmless functioning of its citizens is an illiberal and authoritarian principle. It supposes, as a matter of course, that individualism is an anachronistic function of premodern societies, and that the “pressing issues of contemporary society” somehow justify increased interference in an already diminishing spectrum of personal choices.

More fundamentally, such arguments are awfully elitist. Those who support compulsory service presume to judge—arbitrarily, subjectively, and individually—the proper allocation of human and material resources in our society. They choose to believe that what most Americans want (big cars, Light Beer, and Gilligan’s Island) is not what they should get (improved city services and “public goods”). And having made that judgment, they declare that everyone should be forced to

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## WORLDVIEW

### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of *Worldview* is to place public policies, particularly in international affairs, under close ethical scrutiny. The Council on Religion and International Affairs, which sponsors the journal, was founded in 1914 by religious and civic leaders brought together by Andrew Carnegie. It was mandated to work toward ending the barbarity of war, to encourage international cooperation, and to promote justice. The Council is independent and nonsectarian. *Worldview* is an important part of the Council’s wide-ranging program in pursuit of these goals.

*Worldview* is open to diverse viewpoints and encourages dialogue and debate on issues of public significance. It is edited in the belief that large political questions cannot be considered adequately apart from ethical and religious reflection. The opinions expressed in *Worldview* do not necessarily reflect the positions of the Council. Through *Worldview* the Council aims to advance the national and international exchange without which our understanding will be dangerously limited.

Philip A. Johnson, *Publisher*

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advancement are negligible. Future pedagogues take note: This depressed labor market will eventually correct itself as fewer students enroll in courses leading into these low-paying fields. The current downward adjustment—or “cobweb”—should be over in four to eight years (two college generations). By then the supply of these unwanted specialists will be commensurate with demand, creating job opportunities for those fortunate enough to be graduating on the up cycle.

There are few bright spots. Biology and psychology are two, but even these two departments will experience a downturn in enrollments once the “cobweb” phenomenon hits these areas in the late seventies. By then we should also be getting less output from our older researchers, a direct consequence of the failure to hire or promote younger scholars.

Because academics are not as vital to our national economy as managers or as vital to our individual well-being as lawyers, they will receive an increasingly smaller share of the national income relative to other workers. Freeman believes “a decline in relative income on the order of 20% beyond that experienced in the early and mid-1970’s” is not unrealistic. This, more than any other single factor, may drive some intellectuals to take risks in the private sector they never would have dared on campus. For either these unneeded professors find a new constituency quickly or we may have to begin stockpiling them like our agricultural surpluses.

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## CONTRIBUTORS

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## Briefly Noted

### Mother Ireland by Edna O’Brien

(Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; 144 pp.; \$12.95)

Edna O’Brien’s feelings toward the land of her birth are both clear and contradictory: Ireland is both a curse and—in ways she has trouble defining—a blessing. The first lines, from Samuel Beckett’s *Malone Dies*, set the mood:

“Let me say before I go any further that I forgive nobody. I wish them all an atrocious life and then the fires and ice of hell and in the execrable generations to come an honoured name.”

In this, her first work of nonfiction, O’Brien guides us through an autobiographical journey marked by anger, resentment, irony, sadness, and, finally, a yearning to recapture the spirit of the land and people she despairs of throughout, and from it “the radical innocence of the moment just before birth.”

O’Brien’s gifts as a writer of fiction strengthen her treatment of fact. The facts of her childhood and early adolescence evoke for the reader a strong sense of how life *feels* in Ireland; mostly it feels “Godridden” by a religion whose insistent demands (“His passion impinged on every thought, word, deed and omission....”) created a life “fervid, enclosed and catastrophic.”

Influenced by a collective sense of expiation and submission, O’Brien spent part of her teenage years in a convent. She despaired, however, of its “cold corridors, accusations and severance from the hearth of life.” With as much defiance as terror she set out for Dublin, hoping to find the more seductive and startling life of a film star. She found instead a place among the country’s brilliant literary ancestors—Yeats, Joyce, O’Connor, and Synge.

Some years later O’Brien booked passage on a mail boat to London. “...I had to go away. That was my victory....Pity arose...for a land so often denuded, pity for a people reluctant to admit that there is anything wrong. That is why we leave. Because we beg to differ. Because we dread the psychological choke.” Yet following this, in the same breathless urgency, O’Brien tells us that the land she has tried so desper-

ately to leave behind is the land that now sustains an inner attitude; an attitude providing her with the rich sensibilities she offers her readers today.

As important as this written journey is the visual journey related through the superbly touching photographic essay by Fergus Bourke. The photographs’ low contrast tones affirm the images of O’Brien’s narrative: dreary, depressing, dreeding. At the same time, they are inspiring portraits of a people tied to the land, the past, and to God. It seems O’Brien felt compelled to write this saga of Ireland—its history, its culture, its personalities—out of the need to reassure herself, even now, that leaving Ireland was the thing to do. One is never quite convinced that, at least for her sake, it was.

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labor in support of their own particular scheme for allocation.

There are those of us who resent such judgments. Since we consider ourselves the intellectual equals of those who favor universal service, we wonder why it is that their vision is more advanced than our own; we wonder what mandate they hold that gives them the moral authority to conscript our labor for their purposes; and we wonder if we lack some moral dimension that prevents us from trying to force our vision of society on them.

Sixteen years ago John Kennedy counseled the American people to “ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” In such pleasantly phrased and balanced prose Kennedy summarized the appeal of universal public service, and in those days of charismatic leadership and cold war confrontation there were many of us who were swept up by the ideal of sacrifice.

But those words were spoken sixteen years ago—before Watergate, before the revelations of FBI and CIA wrongdoing, before we realized that we had spawned an Imperial Presidency. Today those who demand universal public ser-

vice ask a lot: they ask us to trust our government. They ask us to believe that enormous new powers would somehow escape the contamination so long associated with concentrations of power in the hands of government agents. Calls for universal service are not only morally suspect, therefore; they also defy the experience of our own generation.

Donald S. Spencer

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Wilson Carey Williams Responds: The term "voluntary" is not, as Professor Spencer seems to believe, a simple and straightforward term. Technically, we almost always have a "choice": If the state demands that I act in prescribed ways or face fines, imprisonment, or death, I can defy it. Conscripted did not compel citizens to serve; draft resisters, after all, did not serve. They went to jail, and in a sense they "chose" to do so, but I doubt that even Professor Spencer would regard this as "voluntary imprisonment."

Penalties and punishments administered by the state are *not* the only forms of coercion. I am surprised that anyone with Spencer's training needs to be told that economic and social pressures can exert powerful, almost irresistible, pressure on an individual. And the state is often the individual's ally against these forces. If Spencer is consistent, he would have to oppose minimum wage laws and industrial health and safety legislation because it infringes on the "freedom of contract" that denies individual workers the right to "voluntarily" bargain themselves into standard conditions. But perhaps Spencer has the humanity and good sense to be inconsistent; I hope so.

When a military is planned with meticulous attention to the wage level necessary to induce people to enlist (and when this is discussed in public over and over again), it is *not* "unprovable" that the military is intended to be mercenary. Mercenary means "mercantile," responding to the enticements and the punishments of the market.

Affluent Americans, free from the worst economic privations, are also not much tempted by military salaries. If they choose to serve, one may assume their decision is relatively "voluntary." But poorer Americans do face

economic pain, limited choice, and insecurity; even Spencer knows that, I hope. The current American military safeguards the freedom of part of the public because the need of the rest of the people makes them relatively exploitable. And I fear that puts Professor Spencer on the side of the "élite," to the extent that it matters.

I sympathize with Spencer's disillusionment with John Kennedy. But Spencer's *disillusionment* is only the mirror image of his illusions, and it is time he learned better. Spencer invokes "the experience of our generation" as if

it coincided with human wisdom. An antimilitarist isolationist would have done the same in the 1930's; a cold warrior would have done the same in the 1950's. The "experience of one's generation" is likely to prove less than an adequate standard for all generations. *Nothing* human can "escape contamination"; sin is the human fact. Government is prone to err when it acts, but it is *certain* to be wrong if it is indifferent to human misery. And while there is always danger in trusting governments, we would be no better advised to trust ourselves.

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