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John Kelly Suggests More Americans Should Have the Honor of Serving. He's Right.

By CLYDE HABERMAN OCT. 24, 2017

At the risk of belaboring an unfortunate episode that could have been averted with a bit of White House common sense, we need to examine one aspect of John Kelly's equivalent of the St. Crispin's Day speech from "Henry V." This was when Mr. Kelly, the retired four-star general who is President Trump's chief of staff, essentially said that those who haven't served in the military — meaning nearly all Americans — cannot really understand those who have. He may as well have recited "we few, we happy few, we band of brothers" while he was at it.

"We don't look down upon those of you that haven't served," Mr. Kelly said. But then he did exactly that. "In fact, in a way we're a little bit sorry because you'll never have experienced the wonderful joy you get in your heart when you do the kinds of things our servicemen and women do."

Implicit in his remarks was this: If you cannot grasp instinctively what the military goes through, you may well have forfeited the right to criticize it. That point was made explicit by Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary, when she called it "highly inappropriate" to "get into a debate with a four-star Marine general."

Mr. Kelly's statements struck some as offensively patronizing. But they can only bolster the conviction of those among us who believe that reinstating military conscription, or requiring some form of alternative national service, deserves serious consideration — and that the country would be the better for it.

Reviving the draft, abandoned in 1973, would mean that most American families have skin in the game when their political leaders embroil the country in a war of choice. It doesn't take much of an intuitive leap to guess that the last 16 years of war would have unfolded differently if more than a tiny cadre of America's sons and daughters had to fight.

Requiring everyone to serve in some fashion, other than those too physically or psychically impaired, would be a profoundly democratizing action. In time, it might even encourage more civilized political discourse in this atomized land, by putting young people in proximity to those with roots in different ways of life and thinking. It's harder to sneer at the "other" after you've both shared a life-transforming experience.

Equally important, the military would be better off as well. This was underlined by Mr. Kelly's comments. The armed forces would no longer be cast so readily as standing apart — even above — the rest of society. Across the post-draft decades, praise for the sacrifice of servicemen and servicewomen has become more than the decent thing to do. It is widely seen now as almost holy obligation. Anything short of worship risks heresy. Just as bad, it fans within the military the sort of resentment of civilians that Mr. Kelly gave voice to.

Anyone who's worn the uniform knows full well that the armed services are like any other institution — filled with men and women and customs that, while usually honorable, fall far short of perfection. That goes for generals, too. Bringing back the draft could restore a healthier sense of the military's proper place in our national life. It deserves Americans' full support but not quite the saintlike status that Mr. Kelly assigned it and that the absence of compulsory national service encourages.

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