

# A hitch in the army might teach respect

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**O**n a Sunday morning a few weeks ago, in a suburban convenience store, I witnessed an encounter between a middle-class man in his mid-60s and a middle-class youth of about 17, a generational-attitudinal clash that made me think about this country and what's wrong with it.

The man, driving up to the store to park, approached a little too close to the boy, who was on foot, a Walkman clamped to his head. The boy gave him the finger and swaggered into the store.

The man entered and challenged the boy, who was good-sized. The boy told him, "Buzz off, Gramps." The man called him a punk, and offered to enlist one of his two sons to fight him. Almost yelling by now, the man said that if the youth was in a hurry and couldn't wait for one of his sons to get there, he'd step outside with him himself.

The youth by now was backing off; he quickly paid for his purchases, grabbed his small bag, and slunk out the door, muttering.

The man stood in the store for a few moments, trying to regain his composure. He turned to me, the only other customer in the store and obviously a person old enough to remember Pearl Harbor Day, and he said, quietly: "I was in the Air Corps for three years. I flew 25 combat missions on a B-26. I was wounded once. I'm sick of punks like that."

This kind of happening is no aberrant slice of life these days, showing the destructive consequences of a deepening lack of respect for practically everything: authority, institutions, people, property.

But what to do about it? It is perhaps too facile, even if accurate, to say that kids today are spoiled; that their parents often are too busy with their separate careers, hustling to meet bloated mortgage payments and to handle private-school and college tuitions, to pay any real attention to them; that churches and synagogues are artifacts that no longer play any role in inculcating moral or

ethical standards.

I think part of what is at fault in our society may be ascribed to the lack of a sense of service, of obligation — to an understanding that life is not all take, that there should be some give. But there seems to be no inclination in government, or elsewhere, to suggest that this should be. "Gimme" is the selfish shibboleth of the '80s.

Military conscription, in peace as well as in war, used to provide an avenue by which young men — and women, on a volunteer basis — could serve their country, however grudgingly. The experience, in many cases, taught discipline and respect. Sometimes it improved character. And it served another purpose: People from all levels of society were thrown together; the wise ones learned something from each other.

Vietnam scuttled that. War became something to be borne by the underclasses. The rich and the middle class demurred. Then, in 1974, came Richard Nixon's All-Volunteer Army, a politically popular device that eliminated the draft — and with it, any pretense that responsibility for the nation's defense should be shared democratically by everyone. Result: Today's Army is made up largely of the lower class.

This should be changed. The draft should be reinstated, and young men and women, between the ages of 17 and 26, should be required to spend perhaps 18 months to two years either in the military or in alternative service — working in hospitals, mental health facilities, or some kind of city or rural conservation corps.

Would this be expensive? Very. But consider the alternative. We live in a problem society — the drug problem, the alcohol program, the mental disease problem, the unemployment and welfare problem.

Two years of soldiering, or providing some civic service, could help young people learn, up close, about life. They might learn compassion. They might learn something about themselves, and even perhaps acquire a set of values not preceded by a dollar sign.