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Memorial Day recalls legacies
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—This Memorial Day calls up two echoes of America's War in Vietnam.

One involves Richard Blumenthal, Connecticut attorney general and the Democratic Party's candidate for the U.S. Senate. He claimed on occasion in recent years that he served in Vietnam when, in fact, he was in Marine Reserve units that never left home—which, in my opinion, was why he “voluntarily” joined them in the first place.

His Republican opponent is Linda McMahon, wife of Vince McMahon, Jr., who runs World Wrestling Entertainment, a business that sells fake fights with predetermined outcomes under the guise of being real fights without predetermined outcomes.

She became CEO of WWE in 1993 as a legal move during her husband's trial on charges that he distributed steroids to his wrestlers and encouraged their use. After admitting that he had used steroids himself, he was acquitted. He appears to run WWE, but she, too, has shown skill in providing this sort of entertainment.

Mrs. McMahon, two years younger than Blumenthal, has no U.S. military service, and neither does her husband who is six months older than Blumenthal and spent his post-college years as a traveling cup salesman until his father let him join the family's fiction business as a ring announcer in 1969.

The second echo is one of that War's legacies: the all-volunteer military.

Our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, now among the longest in our history, are fought with volunteer soldiers. Conscription in the '60s and early '70s for a war of debated clarity, means and results had fueled anti-draft resistance and anti-war opposition among many -- but, certainly, not all -- of the young baby boomers and their parents.

Anger over a war that was wrapped in so much political, military and moral dispute forced many of us to make unpalatable choices from unpalatable alternatives. Some, of course, went willingly, because they supported the policy and/or agreed with the obligation of military service. Others volunteered to avoid being drafted and hoped to stay out of danger either in a non-combat post or as a member of a stateside National Guard or reserve unit.

Many used deferments of various sorts to keep clear. Some were conscientious objectors whose choices were noncombatant service, civilian alternative service or jail for refusing to have anything to do with the military. An estimated 30,000 to 100,000 left the country.

The draft stunk. By the mid-1960s, it could be gamed, manipulated and avoided. It increasingly fell heaviest on the poorest and least-educated groups as well as those who didn't choose to fight authority. Influential individuals made calls and sent letters to local draft boards. It was ugly, and it was unfair. It was hard to risk your life defending a system like that.

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara came up with Project 100,000 (1966-1971), a program that lowered mental and physical standards for men previously rejected. Project 100,000, which was supposed to produce 100,000 inductees yearly, ultimately turned up about 354,000 soldiers. Of those, about 40 percent were trained for combat compared with a 25 percent rate generally.

McNamara, Johnson and Nixon chose this alternative rather than end student deferments or activate reserves, both of which would have increased war opposition. About 40 percent of the "salvaged" group were African-Americans, compared with their 12 percent enrollment in the services overall.

McNamara described Project 100,000 as a "civil rights" effort. Urban affairs adviser Daniel Patrick Moynihan, for whom Blumenthal was working in the Nixon White House when he joined the reserves, said that military service would socialize the poor and make them better able to compete in civilian life. A 1989 Department of Defense study found, however, that Project 100,000 vets had fared worse in terms of post-service employment, educational achievement and income than their nonveteran peers.

Blumenthal, George W. Bush and Mitch McConnell chose to avoid the draft by joining reserve or National Guard units. In the summer of 1967, McConnell lasted five weeks in a Kentucky Army reserve unit before being let out after Senator John Sherman Cooper, for whom he had interned, intervened. Others of that era like the McMahons, Clinton (who had Senator J. William Fulbright intervene), Pelosi, Romney, Gingrich, Lott, Giuliani, Delay, Rove, Limbaugh and me did not serve.

We were not alone.

Between 1964 and 1975, about 27 million men were eligible for service. Of that number, about 9.2 million served in the military. Only 2.2 million were draftees; the rest were volunteers, some of whom were encouraged by a looming draft notice. On the order of 17 million men, almost two-thirds of the

pool, got out of it.

While I opposed the war on policy grounds, I also opposed an all-volunteer army. A conscript military amounts to a continuing referendum on protracted military interventions, the non-declared-war wars we fought after 1945. I recognize the pros and cons of potential draftees or the electorate as a whole voting for or against starting and continuing a war. Because these are life-and-death matters, choosing a way to “man” a war is as tough a decision as there is.

An all-volunteer military narrows the labor pool and gives a free pass to everyone who doesn't want to bother with this aspect of American citizenship. It pulls disproportionately from less advantaged groups. Rather than reinstitute conscription, both Bush and Obama have sent all-volunteer units into combat year after year.

A conscript military is better for this country *if* it's universal. If it's not, it's worse.

With a very, very few exceptions, everyone can -- and should -- serve in one way or another. While universal service would be expensive, it might be shortened to a six-month hitch for everyone, from which volunteers could extend commitments into various military or non-military alternatives.

I spent 1967 and 1968 angry and troubled by the draft, and I've spent the years since angered and troubled by the draft. I was a “selective conscientious objector,” a person who opposed a particular war for political reasons, not religious reasons. I was never a pacifist. “Selective objection” is not recognized as legal grounds for conscientious-objector status.

I got a medical exemption (asthma/allergies), but I could have been taken, and I could have served.

When I took my physical in August, 1968, I was 23, a college graduate, a second-year graduate student. I was the oldest in my group of 300; the others looked to be 17 or 18 and two months out of high school. I was the only one with a doctor's letter.

I know this sounds weird, but it seemed to me at the time that those running this physical were not interested in taking anyone who did something that indicated he did not want to go. Everyone understood that the military was having fits with reluctant, unmotivated draftees, a situation that worsened in subsequent years.

Blumenthal is 64, my age. I ran into him in 1967, in the Washington Post's newsroom where the Metro Desk had hired him for a couple of months. I was

helping two writers research books and was a volunteer organizer for Vietnam Summer, an anti-war education effort that operated between June and August.

I was looking for a reporter to cover a polite war-questioning petition circulating among Congressional interns that would be handed to President Johnson at their White House farewell ceremony. I was struck by Blumenthal's ambition and the fact that he was running around with a loosened tie and a ripped hole in the back of his white dress shirt as big as my fist. That was a lot cooler than I ever was.

I was working with intern Mark Green who became an author, liberal New York politician, media personality and Nader-type consumer advocate. At the end of the summer, I sold my six-year-old Vespa motor scooter to Green who asked that I provide a six-month parts-and-service warranty. Gotta love those fledgling consumer advocates from New York.

In recent years, Blumenthal began edging his reserve service into something more than it was, into Marine service in Vietnam. Sometimes he reported his record accurately, and sometimes he didn't. He characterized his revisionist descriptions as "misstatements," "a few misplaced words" and "totally unintentional" errors.

I find it implausible for an elaborately educated, word-conscious individual who had been editor of the Harvard Crimson, Yale Law Journal and a high-profile lawyer-politician for 35 years to have misspoken his own history accidentally. Why he occasionally embellished a record that could be easily fact-checked escapes me. Why his wife and his advisers did not tell him to stop is beyond me.

Although the Wall Street Journal's editorial board thinks Blumenthal is too self-righteous and too tough on business, Connecticut voters have endorsed his pro-consumer approach to law and politics for more than 25 years.

It's hard to imagine him losing to Mrs. McMahon whose two relevant qualifications are \$50 million of family money and a well-rehearsed ability to take a fall in the squared circle.

If he loses, it's his own fault.

And so we have another round of unpalatable choices, this one between a politician who exaggerated his military service and a woman who was dubbed CEO of her husband's business to protect its assets. I'd vote for the candidate who calls for a universal-service system that does not contain the kind of loopholes through which so many of us wiggled 40 years ago.

I felt this way when my daughter was looking at colleges, and I suggested that she consider ROTC at Johns Hopkins. It was far harder for me to think about having her in harm's way than me.

Memorial Day should be about honoring. It took some time after the Vietnam War to get back there, but it's the right place to be.

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