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AS PAST RECEDES, GERMANS RECONSIDER THE DRAFT

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BERLIN — For the first time in more than half a century, Germany's political leadership appears ready to end the draft, a post World War II mandate embedded in the Constitution to prevent this nation's military from ever again developing into a state-within-a-state that could impede democracy and start war.

The idea of the draft has become an anachronism in the post-cold-war world, where security concerns have shifted, demanding smaller, professional militaries to deal with hot spots around the world and to combat terrorist threats. Most of the West long ago abandoned conscription.

But Germany's history and a deep attachment to the draft by the conservative parties have until now meant clinging to conscription, even as it became largely symbolic. Few young men served, and those who did usually served just six months. The draft was instituted in 1956 to develop an army of so-called "citizens in uniform," creating an armed force integrated with society, loyal to the civilian leadership and immune to the kind of elitist force that dominated state affairs during the years of the Weimar Republic and before.

Germans today are less constrained by their past, motivated increasingly by their own perceived self-interest. The willingness to overhaul the military has been cast as another step in the normalization of the state. In ways large and small, Germans are increasingly comfortable in their own skin, waving flags and singing national anthems, gestures once seen as nationalist taboos. "Our coming to terms with the past is nearly done," said Hajo Funke, a professor of political science at Free University in Berlin, who said he supported moving to an all-volunteer military.

The Germany that was willing to exert its economic power and resist pressure to stimulate its economy during the financial crisis is the Germany that now appears ready to freeze the draft.

"Drafting young men instead of having professional soldiers was a guarantee for a democratic army," said Rainer Arnold of the opposition Social Democrats and the ranking member on the Defense Committee of the German Bundestag, or Parliament. "But today, almost nobody fears anymore that an army consisting largely of profes-

sional soldiers would extract itself from civilian control and pursue its own interests. But it took time to arrive at this trust."

The issue of overhauling the military has been discussed for years, but was thrust onto the front burner on Monday by the popular defense minister, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, when he unveiled a plan to revamp the Bundeswehr, or armed forces. His plan called for reducing the force size to 163,000 from about 250,000 today, streamlining the command structure, closing military bases and freeing conscription.

He pressed his case by saying the overhaul was necessary to save money — about eight billion euros, or around \$10 billion, in three years — and to deal with changing security demands. His rationale, if not all the details of his plan, was widely supported.

But it was the concept of a draft as essential to preserving democracy that proved, for some, the hardest to let go.

"The model of a 'citizen in uniform' should be kept," wrote a conservative Christian Democrat and member of Parliament, Patricia Lips, on her blog. "Conscription is the important social link between Bundeswehr and society and it has proven that Bundeswehr is an army of democracy."

Chancellor Angela Merkel, also a Christian Democrat, appears ready to accept a political compromise on the subject, one that would preserve the legal requirement of conscription — to calm her own party members — but that would freeze the actual process. Experts said that a decision on the plan was expected by November.

"I wouldn't have thought it would be so easy for them put it away, but it looks like they will stop it," said Richard Hilmer, managing director of Infratest dimap, one of Germany's major polling firms. "It was part of German culture. There is a danger, if you have professional only, you have a separate institution less integrated with German society."

The issue of the draft is an emotional one in any nation, but it is most fraught in Germany. After World War II, it appeared that Germany would never again have a military. That changed during the cold

war. West Germany was admitted to NATO in 1954, and in 1956 it instituted the draft. In 1963, West Germany passed a law allowing all conscientious objectors to perform civil service, for example working in health care facilities instead of in the military.

The Communist threat prompted most West Germans to continue to serve, but after unification, already thin public support for the draft plummeted, said Michael Wolffsohn, a professor of modern history at the University of the Bundeswehr in Munich. "The basic fact is that Germans have not yet come to terms, for obvious reasons, that they have to fight again in a war," he said. "After all they have learned their lesson, so to speak, and they learned it correctly that using military force is basically and fundamentally wrong, given German history."

After unification, the state's commitment to the draft became increasingly symbolic. By 2002 conscripts had to serve only nine months, and then in July, the length of service was cut to six months, a period that even supporters of the draft say is so short as to render it useless.

"At present, unfortunately, the symptoms for a speedy abandonment are multiplying," said Col. Ulrich Kirsch, who heads an organization representing soldiers' interests and who supports preserving the draft. "This is certainly due to the fact that the model which is practiced at present is hardly viable after the shortening of the national service."

Indeed, some young Germans who were entering the draft induction center this week said they had no idea why the draft was instituted in the first place, and knew that it meant only giving up their time for something they were not really interested in doing.

"We are strongly in favor of an all-volunteer army," said Dennis Josten, 23, as he escorted his younger brother to the center. "It's just a waste of time."

Over the years, the size of the force was cut about in half, so that only 17 percent of those eligible were even drafted, and in recent years many more conscripts chose civil service over military service. In 2009, the most recent year for which final statistics are available, 68,304 young men went into military service, while 90,555 served in health care facilities.

Starving the system ultimately helped fuel the argument for abandoning it all together. "To have an army integrated in the society is very, very important, very important for us as Greens the same way as for Conservatives," said Winfried Nachtwei, a security expert with the opposition Green Party. "But today, conscription isn't accomplishing that. We have to get it in other ways."