

Date: 10/02/96  
To: Rob Taliercio  
From: Vladimir Petit Medina  
Subject: Lessons from experience

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Responding to the questions:

1)As President of the Standing Committee on Youth Policies of the House, I had to work on a critical area: Military Conscription. Why became critical?

- Unemployment of young people represents nearly 59% of the total unemployment and more than 65% of those under 18 years old refused to serve in the armed forces and rejected the draft process itself.
- There was a deficit of troops (39%) causing dislocation in the Venezuelan defense system, and , also, more than 25.71% of the serving soldiers were discharged and dishonored as a result of their participation in the 1992 coup-attempts.
- Our Constitution declares that every 18-year-old-citizen must serve in the armed forces as a duty and a prior obligation.
- The level of wages was miserable (\$80,00 per month reduced by the corresponding purchase of uniforms and boots charged to this cost) and most young boys were afraid of being sent to the frontier-the most dangerous place to serve in-
- 35% of conscripts were illiterate.
- Relatives of those in service did not receive any social benefits during or after the -two-year service.
- People became upset because the Government started implementing coercitive measures which applications were rejected: Offering the police sums of money for each conscript. Brutality appeared.

When I became appointed as President three attempts to reform the existing law had been rejected by the House.

2) In 1993, after two coup attempts, politicians began to study the problems of the armed forces and riots over the draft were announced. That is the reason why it became an issue.

3)Basically we were aware of :

- The need to preserve the defense system and to meet military expectations at the same time ( the military higher level had been running the conscription process for many years without any constraint imposed by the government).
- The need to tackle the problem as soon as possible due to the public opinion rejection.
- The increasing presence of the colombian guerrilla in the frontier, where conscripts are usually sent to serve.

4)No, but military interests were more important than any other at that time. Decision makers were afraid of disturbing the armed forces because of the recent institutional conflicts.

5)Bargaining process and a new vision of the problem played the key role in getting a positive and unanimous outcome.

6) An agreement and a new law. The Minister of the defense and I, as the President of the Committee, reached an agreement in the following terms:-we agreed to offer every volunteer the national minimum wage (\$300) with an annual inflation adjustment as well as severance benefits;- some collateral benefits as a private Insurance for the conscript and close relatives were implemented;-a special training service to teach them dental and automobile techniques was created;-the conscripts were assured that they would serve near their homes and receive extra-payment for serving on the frontier voluntarily. The new law has not been approved yet but there is a clear consensus about it.

For the last three years coercive conscription has been put aside, contingents are 100% covered and their level is quite acceptable, also, border vigilance posts has grown up to 19%. Now, applicants must line up for a long time to the point that not all can be taken that year. The problem is history.

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