The Prompt:
In some countries every young person must serve two years of military service. Should we have a similar policy in the United States? Write an essay stating your position on this issue and supporting it with convincing reasons. Be sure to explain your reasons in detail.

The Model Essay:

What You Can Do for Your Country

A few countries require every young person to serve two years of military service, and as we continue to face military conflicts across the globe, some have proposed that the United States adopt a similar policy of mandatory conscription. I believe that a two-year period of national service should be compulsory for all young people. However, making the commitment to serve that time in the military should be each individual’s choice. Mandatory conscription will only succeed in putting unmotivated people in the military, making U.S. forces unreliable and less powerful. Instead of serving exclusively in the military, every young person should have the option of participating in some kind of public service that suits his or her interests, such as the AmeriCorps, Habitat for Humanity, the Peace Corps, or Teach For America. If all eighteen-year-olds were required to give two years of public service, they would contribute greatly to their country and communities while acquiring a better sense of the world around them.

One reason the United States military is so powerful is because it is made up of volunteers. Every Marine fighting on the front lines for the United States is there because he or she volunteered and made a commitment to the country. If people were forced to join the military, then the troops might not be as reliable because some soldiers might be unmotivated to fight. Although the military is an excellent place for young people to learn discipline, some of them don’t have respect for the
service the military provides. Nobody would want soldiers fighting in combat who didn’t really want to be there; if people are forced to do a task they haven’t chosen, their performance will be hindered.

Moreover, the U.S. military is known as an elite force. Only a few can make it through all of the training and disciplinary procedures that the military uses to prepare its forces. If anyone and everyone could join, the military would not have such an elite reputation, and the quality of military service as we know it would suffer. As history has proven, it is often the quality and not the quantity of soldiers that can influence the outcome of a military conflict. Young people who are unmotivated or who are physically unable to serve in the military could make the quality of military service decline, thereby making the United States a less powerful force in combat.

For some, joining the military might be the right choice if it complements their skills and career goals. However, others who are resistant to military service should be able to fulfill their duty to their country in other ways. There are many alternatives to military service that appeal to people with varied interests. Some people could be on-call forest rangers; if a forest fire broke out, they could help fight it. Others might be better at rebuilding neighborhoods or building homes for homeless people and low-income families. Other options could include teaching in rural schools or working on emergency crews in times of natural disaster. Young people could also represent their country by doing humanitarian work abroad in programs like the Peace Corps. Through such voluntary service, each and every citizen can participate in serving the country while at the same time putting his or her skills and interests to work.

Proponents of mandatory conscription note that young people who serve in the military return to their communities more mature and worldly. It’s true that under conscription, young people would be
exposed to people of different backgrounds while in training and to people of different cultures if sent abroad. However, this type of personal growth isn’t exclusively a result of military service. It can also be achieved through other types of service. In the Peace Corps, volunteers travel to all corners of the globe and are exposed to many different cultures while serving their country. Similarly, volunteers for Habitat for Humanity serve their own communities while at the same time developing friendships with people from all levels of society.

Some argue that any sort of mandatory national service is a violation of freedom—why, after all, should young people be *required* to serve, even if they get to choose the type of service? Although we do live in a free country where everyone has rights, I don’t believe that anyone should get a “free ride.” The United States runs smoothly due to many different public organizations, branches of government, volunteer services, and the citizens themselves. If no one ever put time or effort into the workings of the country, it wouldn’t be as technologically developed or as successful as it is. Many volunteers keep the country running by sacrificing years of their lives to improving and protecting it. Two years is not a long period of time in the whole scheme of things, and a period of national service should be the very least we can do as repayment for our freedoms.

President John F. Kennedy asked Americans to consider not what their country could do for them, but what they could do for their country. One can respond to this call in many different ways. Military service is a good fit for some, but it’s not a good choice for everyone. I believe that young people should be required to participate in national service but that they should also be allowed to select the best way they can serve. By offering this choice, we can strengthen *both* our military and our public service organizations, enrich our communities and country, and give young people an opportunity to experience the world.