

Reassessing the All-Volunteer Force

When America ended the military draft in 1973 and transitioned to the All-Volunteer Force (AVF), the success of this ambitious enterprise was not guaranteed. Yet by the early 1990s, decisive victories in the Cold War and Operation Desert Storm had convincingly validated the AVF. Today, U.S. military forces are unmatched both globally and historically in their lethality, speed, and agility. Our society's cost-benefit calculus is based upon its volunteer military's demonstrated deterrent effect and battlefield performance, defense expenditures, and the societal premium associated with liberation from the burden of conscription.

Yet, while the majority of Americans hold their soldiers in high esteem and consider the well-endowed AVF a worthy bargain to secure their nation's interests in a dangerous world (a 2012 Gallup poll showed that 75 percent of those polled expressed confidence in their military),¹ we have collectively ignored the severe political and strategic consequences of its implementation. By two important but rarely acknowledged metrics, the advantage of the volunteer over the conscript military is less certain today.

First comes the question of "political ownership" of the military within our democracy. The defense establishment lays claim to vast amounts of taxpayers' dollars and plays a consequential role in deciding vital matters of war and peace. As most citizens take a keen interest in the cost and conduct of their police force, so citizens at the national level should have a broad sense of responsibility for the behavior of our armed forces.

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The Washington Quarterly • 36:1 pp. 7–24
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2013.751647>

We have collectively ignored severe political and strategic consequences of the AVF.

Second is the degree of congressional and media oversight of the volunteer armed forces, and the extent to which the military's senior leadership holds itself accountable for shortcomings in its performance.

The AVF, which has compiled an extraordinary operational record over the past three decades, has liabilities—some

serious—when viewed through the prism of these two considerations. To be clear, I do not urge a return to the draft. There is little public or political appetite for its implementation. Moreover, it is not clear that a sufficiently capable conscript force could even be fielded, given the extensive training required to meet the demands of highly technical and specialized 21st-century warfare. However, we cannot simply ignore weighty issues such as political ownership or oversight and the internal accountability of the armed forces. To continue to do so would be an abdication of the first principles of good republican governance and remove a search for corrective policy options from public discourse.

The argument follows in three parts. To provide context, I first briefly review America's historical experience in filling the ranks of its armed forces, with emphasis on the decision to establish the AVF. An assessment of the volunteer force through the prism of the two metrics above follows. I conclude with some thoughts on implications for our national security and global democratic example.

Creation of the All-Volunteer Force

In the more than two centuries since the U.S. Constitution went into effect in March 1789, our government has only relied on conscription to field an armed force four times: the Civil War (1863–1865), World War I (1917–1918), World War II (1940–1945), and the Cold War (1946–1947 and 1948–1973), a total of 35 years. Moreover, throughout the Cold War era, only during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts were sizeable numbers of draftees needed to supplement the pool of volunteers, reservists, and guardsmen.²

Whenever proposed, conscription has usually been a point of political contention in the United States. When President Madison proposed to draft a mere 40,000 men during the War of 1812, Daniel Webster argued that the Constitution did not provide the government with the authority to conscript citizens, and the measure failed.³ Civil War conscription triggered occasionally violent civil protests, but the drafts associated with the two World Wars were generally supported. And though Congress periodically debated the Cold War

draft, it was not until 1965 when President Johnson significantly increased the number of U.S. troop deployments to Vietnam that popular opposition to the draft became politically salient.

Indeed, the subsequent unrest on American college campuses in reaction to the Vietnam War levies helped inspire Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon in 1968 to promise to end military conscription if elected.⁴ The next year, President Nixon appointed an Advisory Commission on the All-Volunteer Armed Forces to develop a plan for implementing his promise and end conscription. In early 1970, this group—known as the Gates Commission after its chair, former Secretary of Defense Thomas Gates, Jr.—unanimously recommended the adoption of an all-volunteer force. The Commission’s report, accepted and acted upon by the Nixon administration with some modifications, also acknowledged five major objections to the AVF: potential isolation from society and threat to civilian control; with isolation, an erosion of civilian respect; the ranks likely to be disproportionately filled with blacks or those from low-income backgrounds; a decline in the population’s concern with foreign policy issues; and the nation more inclined to embark on “military adventurism.”⁵

Some of these concerns stubbornly persist. Others, the Commission did not foresee. For example, while the report argued persuasively that the AVF would not lead to significant increases in the defense budget, it did not estimate future outlays for retirement and health care costs. That proved to be a serious omission, as retirement costs have increased from about \$4.4 billion in 1973 to over \$50 billion in 2011. Health care has climbed from \$19 billion in 2001 to about \$55 billion in 2011 and continues to balloon.⁶

Although most of the Gates Commission’s recommendations were to prove remarkably sound, especially given the complicated nature of the problem, several of the arguments against the AVF noted in the report emerged over time as more serious than anticipated. Chief among these are the declining political ownership of the U.S. military, and diminished oversight of the military by both Congress and the media.

Eroding Political Ownership

One of the unintended consequences of the AVF is a decline in political ownership of the U.S. military. Princeton Professor Julian Zelizer has noted, “By eliminating the draft, Nixon weakened the most immediate connection that existed between the national security state and average citizens.”⁷ Draft forces

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have inherent domestic political constraints, and the absence of these in a volunteer force may have led to increased military involvement abroad in the last forty years.

If we look at history, we see that the United States has had over 330 conflict-related military deployments since 1798, and about half of these were after World War II, when the U.S. had become a superpower with global security interests.⁸

Though it is difficult to make a robust

empirical case that ending the draft contributed to more frequent use of the U.S. Armed Forces abroad since 1973, the evidence is suggestive.

A more appropriate analysis might be restricted to the post-1945 era, comparing the periods when the United States maintained conscription (1946–1973) and subsequently relied on an entirely volunteer formation (1973–2012). Nineteen overseas military deployments occurred in the 27-year draft period as opposed to more than 144 during the 39-year course, to date, of the AVF. This translates into an AVF-deployments-per-annum ratio five times higher than that of the draft force. Even here, however, precise comparisons are difficult. Many post-1973 uses of military forces were repeated interventions in the Balkans, Haiti, and Iraq, and a large number were in conjunction with UN and NATO operations—not necessarily indicative of the U.S. “military adventurism” warned about by the Gates Commission report. Still, the manifestly increased frequency (by a factor greater than five) of foreign military deployments after the AVF was established is worrisome.

Concerns that a political decoupling of the military from the American people might open the door to military adventurism, noted but dismissed by the Gates Commission, were very much on the minds of some civilian and military leaders during the early years of the AVF. Prominent among this group was U.S. Army Chief of Staff, General Creighton Abrams, who served as the Commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, from 1968 to 1972. Abrams sought to keep the military connected to the Congress, states, and public by ensuring the forces were structured so that a large-scale protracted conflict (such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan more recently) would require significant mobilization of reserves and the National Guard, an act generally not free of political risk.⁹ According to General John Vessey, a former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Abrams believed the “armed forces [were] an expression of the nation. If you [took] them out of a national context, you [were] likely to screw them up . . . part and parcel of that was that you couldn’t go to war without calling up the reserves.”¹⁰

Reserves have, in fact, been substantially employed in both Iraq and Afghanistan, but not in sufficient numbers to give real pause to government leaders ordering their deployments. (Reservist contributions to manning the total force in Iraq and Afghanistan peaked in Fiscal Year 2005 at 68.3 million military duty days, representing some 40 percent of

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the total deployed force, but by the time of the 2007 Iraq surge, this had dropped to about 20 percent.)¹¹ Thus, with well-resourced and capable volunteers supplemented by generally willing reservists, America's politicians have not faced significant organized domestic grassroots opposition to unpopular conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, quite unlike the Vietnam War experience.

Of course, the two AVF interventions unique in their breadth and scope are Iraq and Afghanistan. Together, they are the longest in duration of any American war (the Afghanistan conflict alone enjoys this distinction); the seventh most lethal American conflict measured in fatalities; second in fatalities of those fought entirely with volunteer forces (after the 1846–1848 Mexican–American War); and currently second only to World War II in expense, perhaps yet to become the most costly armed intervention in U.S. history.¹²

Here, one can make a reasonable argument that not having those domestic political constraints inherent in a draft force may have freed otherwise cautious U.S. government decisionmakers to carry out large-scale extended military operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. When I have spoken on this topic to various audiences around the country, I ask: “If we had a conscripted military good enough to accomplish the same missions assigned our current volunteer forces (admittedly a bold assumption), would the U.S. have invaded Iraq in 2003 and had almost 100,000 troops stationed in Afghanistan one decade after 9/11?” Never more than one or two participants offer an affirmative response.

The 1970 Gates Commission also concluded that adoption of an all-volunteer force would “actually increase democratic participation in decisions concerning the use of military force” contending, in part, that “[i]f tax increases are needed or military spending claims priority over other public spending, a broad public debate is likely. Recent history suggests that increased taxes generate far more public discussion than increased draft calls.”¹³ For at least three reasons, this prediction proved inaccurate.

The first is a matter of scale. U.S. defense outlays today, massive though they are (constituting an estimated 45 percent of the global total in 2011), consume a

much smaller percentage of total federal spending than forty years ago when the Gates Commission report was published.¹⁴ For example, in 1968 (the height of Vietnam War) defense-military spending accounted for 45.1 percent of federal outlays; in 2008 (the year marking the maximum combined level of effort in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars) defense-military spending was only 19.9 percent of the U.S. federal budget, a percentage exceeded by Health and Human Services (23.5 percent), Social Security (21.7 percent), and almost equaled by Treasury's debt financing (18.4 percent). In 1968, defense spending stood at 9.4 percent of GDP, whereas in 2009 it composed 4.6 percent.¹⁵ And unlike during the era of the Gates Commission, advocates of robust military spending now argue that defense should be largely immune from the ongoing budget debates, since the real deficit threats are posed by entitlement programs and mounting interest payments on our national debt.

The second is a matter of context. For now at least, our nation's unprecedented extended deficit spending spree has removed from the public agenda any serious discussion about current expenditure levels. Thomas Gates, who served as a Secretary of Defense under the fiscally conservative President Dwight Eisenhower, could never have imagined our current state of affairs. With U.S. federal deficits as a percentage of GDP reaching levels not experienced since the immediate aftermath of the WWII, the quest for budget discipline that Gates took as a given in his days has been all but abandoned. The problem was made more acute during the course of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts as the Bush Administration, supported by Congress, actually reduced taxes and made housing credit more plentiful. American citizens could be forgiven for making no connection between their individual tax payments and the real cost of two distant wars.¹⁶

The third reason is structural. The extraordinary and unprecedented use of civilian contractors in conflict zones has obscured the actual price of war from the American people, who tend to measure costs in number of troops deployed. This use of contractors on battlefields proliferated during the first decade of the 21st century. Estimates indicate that between 2007 and 2011, on average, contractors outnumbered deployed military personnel in both Iraq and Afghanistan, peaking in late 2008 at over 200,000, a huge increase from Operation Desert Storm in 1991 when only about 4000 were employed.¹⁷ One might argue that the Department of Defense could also employ numerous contractors to augment a conscript force, but the point is that their large-scale use in support of our volunteer armed forces conceals the real scope of conflict from the American people. It also reduces pressure on the military's leadership either to recommend strategies that can be implemented by the extant force, or alternatively to request a large expansion of the AVF which might, in turn, open a debate about conscription. To this argument must be added a consideration of

the very mixed performance of contractors during the extended conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁸ If the AVF will be dependent upon private military and security companies to wage future large-scale protracted wars, as seems likely, then the liabilities associated with employing contractors must be considered a cost as well.

Our nation's particular historical circumstances constitute another structural feature that may also contribute to the AVF's frequent dispatch abroad. Whereas America has been the sole global military superpower since the end of the Cold War, the same is not true in the economic domain. Today's world is economically multipolar. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States gained and has maintained a huge comparative advantage against all other contenders in the use of coercive power (versus economic and soft power). Military force now often appears as the most cost-effective instrument of American national power. Such a hypothesis is speculative, but is also consistent with historical theories of change in world politics that posit how economically declining hegemonic powers often overreach militarily to preserve global systems whose maintenance is considered a matter of vital prestige.¹⁹ Therefore, the deployment of the AVF overseas (and lack of public ownership in these decisions) may theoretically be even more likely in the near future.

Declining Accountability

The second unintended consequence of the AVF, which the Gates Commission did not speculate on, is the potential impact on the quality of civilian oversight and on the willingness of senior military officers to take fair responsibility for their organization's failures. I believe both have suffered, though the views I offer here are admittedly more informed by personal experience than by quantitative analysis.

Diminished Oversight by Congress and the Media

The two most important external sources of imposed accountability on the American military are Congress and the media. Neither has performed with distinction in recent decades. First, consider Congress. The framers of the U.S. Constitution believed that Congress should have extensive authority to take the country to war—codified in Article 1, Section 8, Paragraph 11. Yet, Congress has only exercised its constitutional prerogative to declare war five times in America's history, and not since World War II. The reassertion of congressional war-making authority in the War Powers Resolution has been ignored by every President since its enactment in 1973.²⁰

Under the AVF model, Congress has even fewer incentives to assert its constitutional responsibilities over the executive branch, especially in the

preliminary and initial stages of a military intervention. Without sizeable numbers of organized constituents fretting about the personal and family costs of a conflict, a legislator has incentive to discount the future and avoid casting a vote against waging war during the flag-waving stage of a crisis (consider, for example, the many politicians who survived their 2002 votes in favor of the Iraq War Resolution, simply claiming later they were misled by the Bush Administration). Most members of Congress, always with an eye on reelection, will hesitate before contesting strong executive appeals to commit forces abroad in the stated defense of the national interest. By such abdication of responsibility, Congress is failing to serve as the check on executive power envisioned by the drafters of the Constitution.

Furthermore, the number of serving members of Congress with military experience has decreased significantly since the end of conscription in 1973. In the 91st Congress (1969–1971), 398 members had served in the military; in the current 112th Congress (2011–2013), only 118 had, a drop from over 73 percent to about 22 percent.²¹ Additionally, very few members of Congress actually have sons or daughters serving in the armed forces, and are therefore even more removed from the military.

Congress appears less inclined to rigorously challenge senior military officers.

With the attendant loss of expertise, family ties, and perhaps even interest, Congress appears less inclined to rigorously challenge senior military officers' advice or question their management practices. Indeed, nearly abject congressional deference to the military has become all too common. When asked their views on the prosecution of an ongoing conflict, politicians typically assert that they will give the generals and admirals

whatever they need—hardly a strong affirmation of civilian control of the military. Concerned about potential political fallout from charges of “not supporting the troops” and lacking confidence in their own knowledge, members tread cautiously before publicly disagreeing with ranking professional soldiers and the strategies which they advocate.²²

I had an opportunity when serving as the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan to witness this reticence first hand. Visiting members of Congress generally were passive and supportive when receiving briefings from uniformed military leaders. These members placed a hefty premium on photo opportunities with troops throughout their visits. On the other hand, they were always skeptical and occasionally confrontational when in similar sessions with the embassy's civilian team in Kabul. Having previously served twice as a military commander in Afghanistan, I could plainly see the contrast.

To be clear, I think the Congressional members were right to challenge our civilian team. We were spending a huge amount of taxpayers' money, war aims were hard to define, and progress difficult to measure. Congress' job is to exercise oversight, and members owed their constituents informed judgments. However, by not subjecting the military—which in Afghanistan was consuming over twenty times the amount of funds spent by the civilian team—to the same rigorous standards of scrutiny, these legislators were applying a double standard and not sufficiently executing their constitutional responsibilities.²³

A vignette illustrates the impact of the all-volunteer force on congressional oversight of the military. Over an eighteen-month period from early 2011–July 2012, some 46 coalition soldiers were murdered by their supposed allies in the Afghan National Army and Police in 29 reported attacks.²⁴ We could assume that with a draft force, families of those killed would have clamored for congressional hearings, and that Congress would have eventually obliged or perhaps even preempted such action. Yet during that period, only one brief ninety-five-minute congressional hearing was held on this topic, and it received scant media attention.²⁵ In seeking a balance between displays of deferential respect for the volunteer military and the exercise of sober, demanding oversight, members have often found political expediency in prioritizing the former.

The performance of the media has, like that of Congress, been uneven in shining a spotlight on the all-volunteer force. I say “uneven” because occasionally excellent press exposés, well-researched books, and analytical think-tank reports have tightened accountability somewhat. It might be argued that the lack of tough media reporting on the military may simply reflect the high standards achieved by the U.S. Armed Forces; perhaps the good news has crowded out the bad. This is, however, a dubious proposition, especially given the fantastic amounts of money spent by our military in chaotic expeditionary environments where efficiencies are impossible to achieve and massive amounts of waste, fraud, and corruption are all but unavoidable.

Sophisticated media reporting and focus on today's military have diminished over time for several reasons, some attributable to broader industry trends and others perhaps more specifically to the nature of the AVF. First, the loss of access to senior-level military officials is a high-risk business proposition in a combat zone. Hence, reporters have been careful to avoid burning bridges with critical reporting that combats command headquarters. Add to this the relentlessly time-constrained news cycle coupled with real-time reporting, blogs, and Twitter, and

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the media spend very little time on in-depth reporting. It quickly becomes evident why some of the most insightful, frank, and surprising stories about senior military commanders and their strategies often appear only intermittently, authored by the handful of non-mainstream media outlets or by reporters on special assignments.

Second, the decline in resources that many major media outlets devote to investigative journalism has meant, in turn, fewer hard looks at the military, not to mention other subjects of national concern. This is especially true given that the armed forces, an all-volunteer organization, elicit less reader or viewer interest than, say, scandals involving domestic politicians or titillating revelations about public figures or Hollywood luminaries.

Financially strapped major media also attempt to provide “I was there” frontline reporting through the relatively recent innovation of embedding journalists with combat units. For the immediately engaged parties, embedding is a clear win-win; reporters have access to dramatic stories of hardship and heroism, and commanders are better able to control the message. However, as journalist and novelist David Ignatius writes:

But embedding comes at a price. We are observing these wars from just one perspective, not seeing them whole. When you see my byline from Kandahar or Kabul or Basra, you should not think that I am out among ordinary people, asking questions of all sides. I am usually inside an American military bubble. That vantage point has value, but it is hardly a full picture. I fear that an embedded media is becoming the norm, and not just when it comes to war.²⁶

Ignatius’ argument can be taken even further; a reporter embedded in an all-volunteer unit manned entirely—at all levels—by those greatly concerned about professional reputations and future careers will acquire less ground truth than he or she might perhaps realize or admit.

Third, the well-funded Department of Defense and Armed Forces have, over time, developed long-term relationships with various think tanks, analysts, and retired military consultants whom they periodically ask or encourage to visit theaters of war and provide assessments. Arrangements in the conflict zone, entirely orchestrated by the military, include logistics, security, travel, and scheduling. Not surprisingly, when the travelers return to the United States, they generally support their sponsor’s views in written op-eds and appearances on news shows.

What is extraordinary is that although no other government agency has the autonomy or resources to engage in such taxpayer-subsidized self-promotion, the Department of Defense and military have not been held accountable. As ambassador from 2009–2011, I marveled at how Defense Department-sponsored consultants would spend weeks at a time in Afghanistan, with them often concluding that while the military dimension of the then-ongoing surge was

generally achieving intended results, shortcomings found in other domains (such as the civilian side) jeopardized overall mission success.

The need for extensive, rigorous, and dispassionate oversight of our armed forces is apparent. The expenditures involved are immense, the national security stakes high, and the potential moral and political degradation associated with warfare extreme. However, with the connective tissue between the U.S. military and society weakened by the AVF construct, two critically important gatekeepers—Congress and the media—have reduced their vigilance. When a reporter who has written skillfully on Afghanistan and Pakistan, Dexter Filkins, was asked during an interview on National Public Radio where all the billions spent on the Afghan Army has gone, he replied, “The first is, you know, it’s Afghanistan and . . . it’s hard to imagine unless you see it, but if you can imagine a place on the moon, trying to build a base on the moon.”²⁷ Whether the U.S. military was manned by volunteers or conscripts, Congress as well as the media would be moved to praise the daring and courage required to metaphorically build bases on the moon. But only with a conscript force might Congress, reinforced by the media, feel compelled to question why they were attempting to do so in the first place.

Military Leadership and the “Strategic Corporal”

Last, I turn to the topic of accountability among senior U.S. military leaders. Samuel Huntington, in his classic work on civil–military relations, *The Soldier and the State*, published in 1957 during the Cold War conscription era, wrote that key professional attributes of officership include expertise in the management of violence, acceptance of responsibility, and motivation derived from “technical love for his craft and the sense of social obligation to utilize this craft for the benefit of society.”²⁸ Rigorous adherence to these attributes, in turn, is critical if the profession is to self-limit its behavior in ways that reinforce internal accountability and objective civilian control of the military.

The attribute of expertise has, in a sense, been undermined by ever expanding boundaries of claimed professional military competence. As our volunteer armed forces have been increasingly employed in counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, Huntington’s concise expression that the professional officer’s “peculiar skill . . . is the management of violence” has lost its bite.²⁹ The breathtaking scope of COIN operations, as conceived in current U.S. military doctrine, makes this so.

The U.S. Army and Marine Corps doctrinal guide to COIN, *Field Manual (FM) 3–24*, states:

The military forces’ primary function in COIN is protecting [the] populace Political, social, and economic programs are most commonly and appropriately associated with civilian organizations and expertise; however, effective

implementation of these programs is more important than who performs the tasks...Counterinsurgents take upon themselves responsibility for the people's well-being in all its manifestations. These include the following: Security from insurgent intimidation and coercion, as well as from nonpolitical violence and crime; provision for basic economic needs; provision of essential services, such as water, electricity, sanitation, and medical care; sustainment of key social and cultural institutions; [and] other aspects that contribute to a society's basic quality of life.³⁰

Because no other civilian department can do so, our military rises to this self-defined overarching COIN challenge by generating ever new capabilities at the speed and scale of a powerful and loosely controlled Pentagon. As a result, our armed forces, unchecked and often encouraged by civilian authorities, have taken on more tasks not directly related to warfighting. This is particularly true in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I do not debate the rationale or logic behind most of the non-traditional programs and projects undertaken by the military as it has endeavored to creatively apply its COIN doctrine. Indeed, as a commander and ambassador in Afghanistan, I advocated for some of these programs myself. Yet, as the armed services have become major stakeholders in ever expanding areas of our government, Huntington's implicit civilian-military contract that grants a degree of autonomy to military officers "to manage violence" in return for their profession's monopolization by the state has been emptied of content.³¹ Professional boundaries for the appropriate exercise of military influence have slowly eroded. This has diluted and diminished officer corps' emphasis on essential war-fighting skills. Huntington emphasized that, similar to most professions, the quality of officership is characterized by responsibility. Once again, the recent protracted messy conflicts that our volunteer legions have been thrust into have chipped away at standards of accountability.

The unique nature of 21st-century conflicts and its relevance to the contemporary art of command was made clear in 1999 by Marine Corps Commandant General Charles Krulak, who authored an article that popularized the term "strategic corporal." He explained how in the course of modern complex wars, a single member of the armed forces, even at the most junior levels, can become "...the most conspicuous symbol of American foreign policy [who potentially influences] not only the immediate tactical situation, but the operational and strategic levels as well. His actions, therefore, will directly impact the outcome of the larger operation; and he will become...the *Strategic Corporal*."³² The term became popularized in military circles. Indeed, FM 3-24 explicitly affirms the concept by noting that "...so-called 'strategic corporals' [often] make decisions at the tactical level that have strategic consequences. Senior leaders set the proper direction and climate with thorough training and clear guidance; then they trust their subordinates to do the right thing."³³

Of course, during large-scale conventional wars of the past, there were no “strategic corporals.”³⁴ A breach of the law of land warfare by an infantry squad of ten soldiers during the Battle for Normandy was a matter handled at lower echelons of command and strategically inconsequential. General Eisenhower, the theater-level commander, was not held accountable for such acts of misconduct because they were not relevant to the conduct of the war at his level. Yet, consistent with the term “strategic corporal,” we have seen how similar violations of discipline and regulations have had catastrophic consequences during the wars we have waged in the 21st century. Fallout from the Abu Ghraib scandal, murders of civilians, and violations of enemy corpses are illustrations. On one hand, I believe the conduct of the American Armed Forces over the course of the two protracted campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan has been extraordinary; it testifies to the quality of the force that, in a decade of hard fighting, more criminal acts or lapses have not reverberated at the strategic level. But on the other hand, if singular failures of the strategic corporal can and do have strategic consequences, at what point must the strategic commander be held accountable?

In other words, shouldn't strategic commanders, in offering courses of action to their civilian leaders, make explicit the risk of plan failure that could occur from actions by a strategic corporal? And if the risk is deemed too great, shouldn't the approach be changed? If the risk is to be absorbed, who should absorb it? When the President of the United States has to repeatedly apologize for the misdeeds of members of our armed forces on the global stage, we are not well-served. Either the doctrine is too problematic and needs to be reconsidered, or there must be accountability at the level of theater commanders when there are frequent failures at the strategic level.³⁵

In no small measure, the amount of trust American society places in the officer corps is founded upon their reputation for selfless national service. Huntington defined the American military profession as one in which the life of the officer “. . . subordinates man to duty for society's purposes,” going on to say that “modern man may well find his monastery in the Army.”³⁶ However, in contrast with this ideal, the tendency in recent years has been for ever more senior retired officers (former volunteers) to leverage their military experience and networks to earn considerable incomes after hanging up the uniform.

A comprehensive 2010 *Boston Globe* study of the post-military careers of some 750 three- and four-star generals and admirals who retired from active duty over the past two decades found that from 2004–2008, 80 percent went to work as consultants or defense executives, compared with less than 50 percent who did so ten years earlier. Bryan Bender, the author of an article explaining the study, wrote: “The revolving-door culture of Capitol Hill—where former lawmakers and staffers commonly market their insider knowledge to lobbying firms—is

now pervasive at the senior rungs of the military leadership.” Senator Jack Reed (D-RI), himself a West Point graduate, was quoted by Bender as saying, “When I was an officer in the 1970s, most general officers went off to some sunny place and retired. Now the definition of success of a general officer is to move on and become successful in the business world.”³⁷ Using Huntington’s metaphor, it would be the equivalent of overwhelming numbers of retired abbots somehow capitalizing on their long service to their religious orders and finding ways to earn substantial wealth the moment they cast off their robes.

My point in examining the American military profession’s attributes of well-demarcated expertise, responsibility, and social obligation is *not* to criticize practices that are legally sanctioned and publicly accepted (though perhaps not deeply understood). Rather, it is to offer for consideration the proposition that the kind of officership described in the Huntington ideal differs in important ways from that found within our volunteer armed forces in the 21st century. In other words, the AVF has developed such a high degree of corporate autonomy and entitlement that its senior executives are not exhibiting the attributes needed to ensure necessary accountability.

The Unintended Consequences of an All-Volunteer Force

In the end, if the establishment of the AVF in 1973 did entail unanticipated and rarely acknowledged costs in terms of political ownership and accountability, does it even matter? I contend it most profoundly does. There are three reasons this is so.

The great expense and frequent employment of the AVF have become givens.

First, as previously discussed, the great expense and frequent employment of the all-volunteer force have become givens within our body politic. The U.S. military, ever versatile and ready to confront new security challenges, has become Thor’s hammer that makes increasing numbers of foreign policy problems appear to be nails which the U.S. military must address. It has

not always been this way in the United States, not even during the first full decade of the Cold War. As Lesley Gelb has written:

Truman and Eisenhower carried out their [economic] reforms while holding military spending in check—Pentagon budgets came last, not first. Both presidents allocated defense outlays using the “remainder method,” whereby they subtracted necessary domestic spending from tax revenues and gave the leftovers (the “residual,” as Eisenhower called it) to defense. . . . [They] were particularly conscious of the ill effects of being a debtor nation.³⁸

Yet today, while the domestic implications of our mounting fiscal woes seem evident to most Americans, the long-term impact on our international security standing does not. Our relatively insulated defense spending is rarely included in serious debates about a comprehensive security strategy that must be founded upon economic strength and human capital.

Second, to the extent that the inception of the all-volunteer force has allowed and tempted the United States to frequently deploy superbly trained and equipped troops into harm's way, there have been unintended consequences. One is reminded of the tale of the knight who returned to the castle after a long hard day of battle and reported proudly to his king, "Sire, I have been defeating the soldiers and burning the towns of your enemies in the west all day on your behalf." The king, taken aback, exclaimed, "But I have no enemies to the west!" The knight, crestfallen, said, "Well, you do now, Sire!" Sober national assessments about opportunity and reputational costs associated with the use of force have not been sufficiently rigorous in recent decades.

Third and perhaps most significant is the effect that the end of the obligation of military service has had on the civic virtue necessary to sustain a republic. We collectively claim the need for a robust armed forces given the multi-faceted foreign threats our country faces, and yet as individuals, do not wish to be troubled with any personal responsibility for manning the frontier. The merits of the volunteer force are clear and few Americans have a strong desire to return to a draft.³⁹ Moreover, it may be possible to address certain negative consequences of the all-volunteer force through various policy means and approaches separate from reinstating conscription. In fact, given the stakes, we must find a way to deal explicitly with the shortcomings of the all-volunteer force in an incremental, politically pragmatic fashion. But that process has to start with an honest and serious admission of that force's drawbacks.

Still, as social and cultural historian Beth Bailey has noted at the conclusion of her superb study of the AVF: "In a democratic nation, there is something lost when individual liberty is valued over all and the rights and benefits of citizenship become less closely linked to its duties and obligations."⁴⁰ As the world's leading power priding itself on a willingness to employ its vast military might in defense of universal democratic values, there is a truth and irony here that should at least be acknowledged.

Notes

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