



Sgt. Nicholas Bostic (*left*), a petroleum supply specialist, reenlists for four more years of service in Adazi, Latvia, 21 March 2022. (Photo courtesy of the Department of Defense)

America's Call to Duty

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America faces a national security crisis in fielding a sustainable, formidable military force. This was foreseeable at the inception of the all-volunteer force (AVF) and requires swift action. Over the fifty years since America abandoned conscription, the military has become increasingly isolated from the public it serves, and Americans have lost their sense of responsibility for how the United States fills the ranks of its Armed Forces, how those service members are used, and what hardships they experience. America must come together through a model like the White House Conference on Small Business.¹ Together, Americans can address this crisis and ensure the vitality, strength, and viability of its Armed Forces and U.S. national defense.

In the annals of the AVF, one finds many courageous acts, considerable fortitude, marked determination, and grit. These brave Americans have fought tenaciously through the final years of the Cold War, the Kosovo War, the Gulf War, the conflict in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, and other hot spots around the world. The AVF has carried out its missions consistent with the finest traditions of the brave soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines who preceded them.

In the last fifty years, American service members have left a profound legacy, but it has come at a price—their isolation from the public they serve. That insularity, in time, has meant that the struggles and burdens of the AVF are borne virtually alone by the military, typically out of sight of the American people. This distancing of the

military from its public belies key democratic American values of fundamental fairness, equity, and patriotism. Furthermore, it places at risk the national security of this Nation. Modifications to the AVF model, done in collaboration with the American public, is the best way to ensure a military model that is based on American values and a reliable security posture for another fifty years.

Foreshadowing

The harsh realities confronting Americans and their AVF today were, in some ways, foreseen at the inception of the AVF. In March 1969, as America faced one of the most unpopular wars in its history, and President Richard Nixon's advisors championed libertarian economic theory; he made good on a campaign promise to end the draft.² To do so, he established the Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Forces and placed former Secretary of Defense Thomas Gates at its helm.³ The president tasked this group, which came to be known as the Gates Commission, with "develop(ing) a comprehensive plan for eliminating conscription and moving toward an all-volunteer armed force."⁴

As the commission finalized its work and issued recommendations in late 1969, it anticipated skepticism and concern from both military and political leaders. To address this opposition, the Gates Commission included in its final report a list of specific objections to the AVF, the plans to maintain it, and a rebuttal to each point.

Among the objections mentioned that are concerns today are the following:

- "An all-volunteer force will be very costly—so costly the Nation cannot afford it."⁵
 - "An all-volunteer force will undermine patriotism by weakening the traditional belief that each citizen has a moral obligation to serve his country."⁶
 - "An all-volunteer force would stimulate foreign military adventures, foster an irresponsible foreign policy, and lessen civilian concern about the use of military forces."⁷

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- “A voluntary force will be less effective because not enough highly qualified youths will be likely to enlist and pursue military careers. As the quality of servicemen declines, the prestige and dignity of the services will also decline and further intensify recruiting problems.”⁸

The Current State of the AVF

Media accounts are replete with news about the current recruiting woes of the military services. A common thread of these accounts is the assertion that the military needs to solve its recruiting problem. This mindset places responsibility on the Armed Forces, not the public that provides the manpower and the framework for service. America has a recruiting problem.

Costliness. The Gates Commission examined several potential concerns about whether an AVF could be viable. Some centered around military pay rates. While drafted military personnel can be paid relatively little, an AVF must, to some extent, receive compensation competitive with the civilian market.⁹

Dating back to 1967, federal law required the Department of Defense (DOD) to provide Congress with a report every four years on military compensation.¹⁰ With the advent of the AVF, the quadrennial pay review became of pronounced importance.¹¹ Consistent with previous reviews, one of the things the 2002 *Ninth Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation* looked at was how to set the compensation level to continue attracting recruits. The report found the following:

*Pay [including basic pay, basic allowance for housing, basic allowance for subsistence, and the benefit of these allowances not being taxed] at around the 70th percentile of comparably educated civilians has been necessary to enable the military to recruit and retain the quantity and quality of personnel it requires.*¹²

This article is presented by the American College of National Security Leaders (ACNSL). ACNSL is dedicated to promoting national security by providing a source of commentary and advice to national security practitioners.

As predicted at the birth of the AVF, military pay has risen substantially over the past few decades and, in 2017, was well above the 70th percentile for those with high school diplomas, some college, and associate degrees.¹³ Nevertheless, recruiting has become more and more difficult. Despite current pay levels, in September 2023, the Army is projected to miss its recruiting goal for the second year in a row.¹⁴ While pay increases certainly draw more recruits, this 70th percentile metric no longer seems to be effective.

Thus, the military has continued to raise its pay and offer bonuses over the past decade.¹⁵ These incentives clearly increase recruiting numbers, but they are also extraordinarily expensive.¹⁶ In 2020, the DOD spent about 25 percent of its base budget (approximately \$157 billion) on pay and benefits for service members.¹⁷

Attracting quality. Despite the continuous rise of military pay, attracting quality recruits has remained difficult. Studies show that less than 30 percent of Americans aged seventeen to twenty-four are qualified to serve in the military without a waiver—with the others disqualified largely due to their health, physical fitness, education, and criminal history.¹⁸ Furthermore, the military generally aims to pursue “high-quality recruits,” that is, high school graduates who score in the 50th percentile or above on the Armed Forces Qualification Test.¹⁹

(This group can be further broken down into Category I, II, and IIIa recruits.²⁰ In contrast, Category IV recruits are high school

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**WHAT SOME OF THE MOST
SUCCESSFUL WOMEN
ARE WEARING THIS YEAR.**

ARMY. BE ALL YOU CAN BE.

Army recruiting poster circa 1990. (Photo courtesy of the Department of Defense)

graduates who score between the 10th and 30th percentile.)

Studies have shown that individuals with higher Armed Forces Qualification Test scores make far more effective and efficient service members and perform better in problem-solving scenarios, and they are also more accurate tank gunners and operators of Patriot missiles.²¹ But, as the Armed Forces struggle today to meet its recruiting goals, less qualified individuals are accepted. As an example, for fiscal year 2023, the Navy announced it would allow for up to 20 percent of new recruits to be Category IV.²² Similarly, in 2023, the Army announced it will allow those who test at Category IV (with scores 21 to 30) to enroll in its

Future Soldier Preparatory Course; others who had enrolled in the course had typically improved their scores by eighteen points.²³ This, of course, completely ignores the fact that one's aptitude does not improve by eighteen points, so these individuals are probably still at the Category IV aptitude level.

Who bears the burden of service? As the services turn to the less qualified to meet end-strength goals, it is noteworthy that military service is not evenly distributed across income levels. Americans from the middle three income quintiles are overrepresented, while those from households in the highest income quintile make up only 17 percent of recruits.²⁴ This underscores a growing divide between the wealthiest Americans—arguably the ones who benefit the most from the successes of the Armed Forces—and the military that protects them. This divide may have several wide-reaching, though intangible, effects.

Those in places of power may be less likely to understand the military and the experiences and needs of our troops. Those

who may be in a position to hire veterans may not understand the skill sets one learns in the military. Gravely concerning is that those who decide to send troops into harm's way may themselves have no firsthand understanding of what they are asking our soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen to do. While the wealthy were able to find ways to exempt themselves from service during previous wars in American history, the wealthy of today are automatically exempt—and, given the small number from their income level who serve, appear to feel very little obligation to serve their country.²⁵

Today's military is threatened by an unprecedented recruiting crisis, in no small part because the Nation has changed. The United States has become more diverse, and its population is older. The American



A soldier assigned to the 3rd Division Combat Aviation Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, greets his family at Hunter Army Airfield, Georgia, 5 November 2023, after spending several months in Europe. Prolonged absences due to deployments add to the stress on military families. (Photo by Pfc. Elisha Hall, U.S. Army)

birthrate is declining, and U.S. citizens have become increasingly obese and less healthy.²⁶ Following the Base Realignment and Closure process carried out through the 1990s and 2005, military recruits have come from a smaller number of states, chiefly those with a military or contractor presence.²⁷

Unlike the pre-1973 drafted military of people from all walks of life, different parts of the country, varied educational backgrounds, diverse social experiences, and different political and religious beliefs, today's military is from a very small sliver of American society.²⁸ The current force does not experience the "melting pot" effect that was a microcosm of the American experience that historically made our Nation strong and resilient. The U.S. military has been stronger because of its diversity. As America develops an enhanced approach to manning its military, it must adopt and maintain policies of equal opportunities based on ability and without discrimination or discouragement toward any person based upon gender,

gender identification, sexual orientation, race, color, ethnicity, national origin, or religion.

Today, the American military is increasingly struggling to fill its ranks with qualified recruits, and the cost of doing so continues to rise. At the same time, the brunt of the weight of military service falls largely on the middle class and the poor; by and large, the wealthy remain alienated from our service members.²⁹ Many Americans feel no obligation to serve in the Armed Forces, and many of those who do serve are faced with immense difficulties—both financial and familial.

Stress on the force and family struggles. Certainly, it is difficult for the Armed Forces to fill its ranks. Qualified young people, especially those with higher-paying job opportunities and those from higher-income families, largely seem uninterested in military service. Unfortunately, considering the problems that so many members of the military face today, their decision isn't unreasonable.

Despite growing pay, bonuses, and other incentives, a shocking number of military families struggle to meet even their most basic needs. The RAND Corporation found that, in 2018, 25.8 percent of service members experienced food insecurity, including 30 percent of those living on post. Moreover, 40 percent of these people (10.4 percent of the American military) were qualified as having “very low food security.”³⁰ While the reasons for such struggles remain somewhat unclear, it is known that members of the military who report food insecurity are far more likely than their food-secure colleagues to report personal finance issues, relation-

- only 70 percent described their financial condition as “comfortable”;
- 21 percent reported having relationship problems with their partner because of finances; and
- 17 percent reported that they were in counseling. The majority were seeking help with marital issues, mental health concerns, and couples’ communication issues.³⁴

Finally, these problems may become generational. The children of deployed parents have reported noticing increased levels of stress and anger in their other parent and are more likely to exhibit emotional and

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ship difficulties stemming from finance issues, and to have paid overdraft fees or fallen behind on bills.³¹

While many military families struggle to find adequate food, many others have seen their families face deeply negative effects from their service. One of the greatest issues is domestic violence. A 2021 report to Congress by the Government Accountability Office found that 8,055 cases of domestic violence had been reported to military family advocacy programs in 2019.³² As domestic violence is often unreported, the real number is almost certainly higher. Nevertheless, active-duty personnel and veterans report domestic violence perpetration at over twice the rate of the civilian population, and victimization at over four times the rate.³³ These issues can be aggravated by both post-traumatic stress and alcohol abuse, problems that also plague some military personnel. Furthermore, military families are likely to face a number of other issues arising from the unique stress they experience. According to a 2019 DOD survey,

- 54 percent of active-duty military spouses reported experiencing more stress than usual (at the time the survey was taken);
- 39 percent reported feeling “down, depressed, or hopeless” within the previous two weeks;

behavioral health issues, including aggressive behaviors and anxious/depressive symptoms.³⁵

The nature of military families has changed since the early days of the AVF. Traditionally, military spouses did not participate in the labor market. Today, two-income households are the norm, and military spouses struggle to transition from employer to employer when their service member is transferred to new assignments in new locations. Not only do these families experience disruptions in income, but they also can experience delays in transition when licensing challenges arise at the new location or living overseas presents difficulties in obtaining new employment. These licenses often come with substantial fees, as well. This places stress on the family, is a distraction to the service member, and creates dissatisfaction for the spouse.³⁶ These can all contribute to pressures to leave the service or military parents dissuading offspring from going into the military. Collaboration with employers and engagement with state leaders through the White House Conference’s model can help the Nation arrive at mechanisms supportive of these spouses and what they contribute to their families, their service member, and the Nation.



Navy Lt. Jade Reaves, officer in charge of Talent Acquisition Onboarding Center Syracuse, administers the oath of enlistment to twenty-three future sailors at an Elmira Enforcers hockey game in Elmira, New York, 27 February 2020. (Photo courtesy of the Department of Defense)

The AVE, Iraq, and Afghanistan. When the Gates Commission recommended the AVE, it never intended for it to be the exclusive means of military manpower during a war. It projected out manpower for only ten years, knowing the available manpower would decline after that. So, when the commission planned for war, it felt the country would rely on the National Guard and Reserve to round out military manpower requirements and would use a standby draft capability if needed.³⁷

Yet, when America responded to the attacks on 9/11, despite the remarkably high volume of Selective Service System registrations that ensued, the United States elected to engage in two wars simultaneously using only the AVE.³⁸ To achieve this, DOD lowered enlistment standards, granted record moral waivers, instituted personnel policies like stop-loss, paid out sizable enlistment and reenlistment bonuses, and expanded the use of military contractors. Paired with this, DOD drew upon Reserve Component (RC) service members for repeated deployments, in some

cases for a full two years at a time, placing stress on the force, employers, and RC families. Because the size of the military was small in comparison to the mission requirements of fighting two wars simultaneously, repeated deployments were common. Few American families experienced these hardships, and most were unaware of them.³⁹

This reliance on a small number of citizens to respond to an attack on the homeland has serious implications for American democracy. Is it consistent with democratic ideals to send a small group of service members on repeated deployments while the rest of the U.S. population stays at home and goes about life as normal? Is this consistent with American values? Will the United States, then, address the accompanying impacts these deployments will have on service members and their families?

Just as behavior patterns that conflict with one's moral perspectives can lead to psychological hardships for individuals, society can be adversely affected when it engages in a form of exploitation by which it

burdens a small part of its population with the moral responsibilities and liabilities of war instead of sharing the burden.⁴⁰ Moreover, this type of exploitation can heighten the effects of the service member's moral injuries and can create isolation of those burdened or guilt on the part of those who asked them to carry the burden.⁴¹ Michael Robillard and Bradley Strawser argue this scenario can create the awkward dynamics at play when the public says "thank you for your service" or puts yellow ribbons on their cars and the service members feel uncomfortable and misunderstood by these expressions.⁴²

The Gates Commission dismissed the assertion that the AVF would make it too easy to go to war. They said that, whether employing a draft or the AVF, the same institutions, laws, and policies remained in place that would determine America's involvement in conflicts.⁴³ In 2017, though, following Iraq and Afghanistan, Adm. Mike Mullen and Gen. Colin Powell asserted at a U.S. Naval Institute conference that, under the AVF model, it had become too easy to go to war.⁴⁴ Over time, Mullen has continued to make this case.⁴⁵

Ramifications. While some will debate whether veterans' and their families' hardships from service in Iraq and Afghanistan affect today's recruiting difficulties, one cannot ignore what those veterans and their families endured. The characteristics of their cohort are systemic indicators that an improved approach to manning American forces is needed, especially during wartime.

There is no intent to cast veterans as victims, but one cannot ignore some of the effects in the population who served in those wars. What one sees are higher rates of suicide, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, posttraumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, and other health issues than rest of the population. The Center for Deployment Psychology at the Uniformed Services University notes that there is a compounding nature to some of these issues:

Relationship problems, administrative/legal issues and workplace difficulties, traumatic brain injury (TBI), chronic pain, and sleep disorders are all reasons for suicide within the military.⁴⁶

All these factors led suicide to become the second leading cause of death within the military.⁴⁷

Veterans represent about 8.5 percent of the U.S. population but account for 18 percent of all adult

suicides in the United States, and veteran suicide has been increasing for twenty years.⁴⁸ The VA often reports a decline from twenty-one veteran suicides a day down to seventeen a day, but that figure, once one factors in Guardsmen and Reservists and adjusts for age and sex, is actually 27.5 per 100,000. That means the suicide rate is 1.5 times worse than it was in 2005, and for those eighteen to thirty-four, the increase has been by 76 percent since that date. Additionally, one study found that the suicide rates were especially high for post-9/11 veterans.⁴⁹

The operational tempo following 9/11 is among the highest experienced by our service members and their families.⁵⁰ This has affected spouses and other family members including their soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines. The stress experienced during deployments has been linked to the increased likelihood that spouses will consume alcohol at higher rates than other women their age, experience mental health struggles, and have relationship issues.⁵¹ U.S. studies found multiple deployments were associated with a higher level of depressive and posttraumatic symptoms in spouses and increased adjustment problems in children.⁵²

Reconnecting Americans and Their Military

Nordic countries provide a good example of total defense. While those nations are much smaller than the United States, they bring together the public, employers, industries, communities, political leaders, and the military to address their national defense. The concept of total defense relies on the mobilization and involvement of the public in national defense efforts. Unlike traditional defense policies, total defense takes a whole-of-society approach to protecting the Nation. This means there is institutionalized coordination between a wide range of stakeholders, including the government, the general public, the private sector, and civic organizations.

The involvement of all levels of society in total defense is based on two concepts. The first, improving the resilience of the state, is "the ability of individuals, communities, society and nation to withstand the pressures arising from crisis situations and to recover from their impacts."⁵³ The second, improving the state's resistance or "the readiness to defend a country in case of military threat."⁵⁴

Historically, nonaligned nations implemented total defense during the Cold War as a form of territorial defense and a way to prepare the country and its citizens in case of an emergency.⁵⁵ Today, total defense principles are also used by NATO member states in response to increasing Russian aggression. These policies can be found in several countries that border Russia or face existential threats, including Sweden, Switzerland,

strategy is managed by the Security Committee, a part of the Ministry of Defense, and follows a preparedness cooperation model in which all the vital functions of society are looked at through a joint effort between the authorities, businesses, organizations, and citizens.

Sweden accomplishes this in several ways. First, Sweden has long maintained a variety of independent volunteer organizations to support civil and mili-

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Norway, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia.

For example, Norway describes its total defense policy as a framework that “enables relevant civilian assets to support the national and allied defense efforts during peacetime, crisis, and armed conflict. If necessary, all national resources can be mobilized in the defense of Norway.”⁵⁶ In doing so, military defense becomes inextricably connected to the will of the public and an established part of the interest of all members of society. This approach to national security strengthens the connection between the state and the public by incorporating them into national security processes.

The application of total defense policies varies significantly between states. Even the concept of total defense has changed over time to accommodate both conventional and hybrid threats. Consequently, applying total defense policies in the United States will mean learning from its application in other countries and creating an open dialogue about how to best integrate these practices in every level of society. In doing so, a more comprehensive approach can be applied to improving national security.

In Sweden, total defense was reintroduced in 2015, which included the reactivation of conscription in 2017. Swedish total defense strategy identified several national interests as guidelines for its security policy, including the safety, security, and health of the population, the functionality of societal critical functions, promoting stability and security in the nearby region, and the upholding of values such as democracy, rule of law, and individual rights. This

tary defense. They are nonprofit, independent of the armed forces, and regularly recruit and train citizens for defense duties.⁵⁷ Second, Sweden has long involved industry in creating a comprehensive total defense. A temporary commission for war preparedness in World War II led to the creation of a permanent government agency responsible for peacetime planning and fortification of reserve stocks for socially important raw materials. These plans were developed through close collaboration between private and public companies under a lead agency. Companies considered important for defense and crisis were allowed to “operate as usual on the private market during normal times but were, in the event of a crisis or war, bound by contract to supply goods and service.”⁵⁸ While Sweden’s situation has changed significantly since World War II, it still has laws governing how it should function in a state of emergency and how businesses should participate in total defense planning. Recent legislation in Sweden has also defined “ten readiness sectors with ten state agencies responsible for sector readiness, including the contributions of businesses.”⁵⁹ Even in a changing defense environment, Sweden has found ways to make industry a part of the national security conversation.

On a community level, Norway has applied the total defense concept by educating and communicating directly with the public. To involve communities, leaflets were sent out to all households to prepare the nation for the loss of essential services due to emergencies, such as natural disasters or war. Furthermore,

their reference manual includes preparation in both peacetime and war, emphasizing that total defense is “intended to ensure best utilization of society’s limited resources when it comes to prevention, contingency planning and consequence management across the entire spectrum of crises.”⁶⁰ Norway’s total defense approach has led to significant public support of the military, with recent opinion polls suggesting that

In the United States, however, no national security framework exists to include the private sector and general public in defense efforts. Typically, threats in the United States are approached through a lead agency with particular jurisdictions such as the FBI for counterterrorism or the DHS for border security. According to Jeffrey V. Gardner, “None of the homeland defense or homeland security functions

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less than 14 percent supported armed resistance in response to an attack and 66 percent supported defending Nordic neighbors.⁶¹ This underscores the effectiveness of community involvement in creating a sustainable military force.

In response to Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014, Lithuania has taken decisive steps to transition to a total defense posture. This has included modernization and creation of new military infrastructure, reintroducing military conscription, and developing a new lead agency to consolidate all government efforts. In addition, Lithuania has coordinated closely with the public to combat information threats and improve cybersecurity. In an article regarding Lithuania’s total defense efforts, the following was reported:

Such tools as TV programs, internet articles on debunking unfriendly propaganda narratives, improvement of media literacy, and other related topics are initiated both by the governmental institutions and public initiative. There are also a considerable number of seminars and presentations for public officials and different groups of society (school pupils, pensioners, different regions of Lithuania, and so on).⁶²

These efforts from the civilian sector are internationally acclaimed and have been crucial to combating misinformation and improving cybersecurity efforts in Lithuania.

could run effectively by any one agency alone ... A number of experts and practitioners have called this interagency approach a ‘badly broken’ way to conduct national security.”⁶³ This model typically doesn’t allow room for private sector or citizen involvement. A true “total defense” must integrate all facets of the nation. Regarding ways to improve civil defense in Sweden, Karl Lallerstedt said,

A group of senior civil servants, business leaders, and politicians, with support of several staff, should be commissioned to develop an overall total defense concept and set goals for what the future total defense structure should achieve. Once the overall ambition is set, the government commissions can work out the details of implementation.⁶⁴

By adopting a more inclusive approach, such as the total defense model, the United States can bridge the gap between its military and the rest of society, thus establishing a comprehensive and collaborative national security framework.

How Can America and Its Military Be Reconnected?

Americans love their military. Their support of the end to conscription was never intended to burden a small sliver of society with fighting its wars and experiencing the attendant consequences. Expressions

of admiration and respect for the AVF and its accomplishments are well-intentioned and truthful. However, good intentions and well wishes are not enough to bridge the chasm between the military and the public. More concrete action is necessary.

America launched its AVF based on the work of the Gates Commission and those in the Pentagon who strove to see it to fruition. A new commission is now needed to address how America will field its future force. Congress should establish a commission like the commission used for the White House Conference on Small Business. The White House Conference engaged the small business community in every state through a series of conferences and arrived at policy and legislative recommendations.⁶⁵ Similarly, a commission could be established to engage with the public, employers, industries, community leaders, service members, and service member families through a series of state, regional, and national conferences to address how to ensure a dependable, formidable, and capable national defense for next fifty years. In short, through such conferences, the public can grapple with the difficulties facing the U.S. military and commit to an American form of total defense.

As Robillard and Strawser concluded, However, it is abundantly clear by now that some sort of cultural shift is needed and needed soon. For if no shift whatsoever begins to occur within American society, within America's present civil-military relationship, and within America's soul, then this state of affairs as we head further into the twenty-first century will show itself to be not only imprudent, or unsustainable, or unfair, or unjust; indeed, it will show itself to be positively absurd.⁶⁶

Americans can do better for themselves, their children, their service members and their families, and veterans by ensuring an improved way to decide who serves and how is consistent with American democratic values. Americans must come together to address their national security crisis. They need to reconnect with the military that serves them, feel responsible for how the United States fills its military ranks, address how troops are used, and grapple with what their soldiers, sailors, airmen, guardians, and marines experience. Creating a new commission that uses the White House Conference model is the best way to reconnect Americans so that the United States continues to field the finest professional national defense force in the world. ■

Notes

1. This model was launched during the Reagan administration and improved upon by the Carter and Clinton administrations; and it included state, regional, and culminating White House conferences. The administrations used these conferences to collaborate with the small business community on policy and legislative initiatives to improve America's small business landscape. See also Robert Jay Dilger, memorandum, "White House Conferences on Small Business," Congressional Research Service (CRS), 16 November 2015, https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.mapps.org/resource/resmgr/federal_issue_WHCSB/CRS_Memo-White_House_Confer.pdf.

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