



(U.S. Air Force photo by Greg L. Davis)

Pfc. Sean Chasteen focuses his attention on a group of Air Force Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps cadets during the 2013 Delaware State JROTC Drill Competition 20 April 2013 at Dover Air Force Base, Delaware. Chasteen, a former JROTC cadet at Caesar Rodney High School, was invited to help judge the drill competition after he completed training to become an explosive ordnance disposal technician.

An All-Volunteer Force for Long-Term Success

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In 2014, America's modern all-volunteer force (AVF) observed its fortieth anniversary. The AVF has, largely, been deemed a success by policy makers as well as the general public since its inception during the Vietnam War up until the conflicts initiated by the 9/11 attacks. However, the last fourteen years of war have placed unprecedented demands on the AVF that have pushed the enlisted force in the

Army to near the breaking point. The consequence of such prolonged stress is that the AVF's long-term viability as a high-quality, affordable, professional force is now at risk. Of particular concern, as the military faces new, rapidly mutating global threats, is the increasing challenge the services—especially the Army—have in acquiring the high-quality enlisted talent they need.

In an effort to aid lawmakers and policy makers in ensuring the continued success of the AVF, this article applies an operational design approach from U.S. joint doctrine to frame the environment, define the strategic problem, and propose the broad outlines of solutions to problems of enlisted recruitment and retention. The intent is to stimulate and focus further research and discussion.

Current Views on the Problem

The problems the military faces are real: the force requires quality enlistees, a civil-military divide does exist, and the current level of required funding for the AVF is fiscally unsustainable. Moreover, these salient issues are interrelated, and any approach that fails to link solutions to all the different parts of the problem in a holistic way will not address the root, systemic issues that put the AVF's future at risk.

Those who value the status of U.S. military members as elite professionals place a premium on the quality of military personnel. But, while the military has focused on improving recruiting efforts, it faces significant challenges in getting those quality personnel. The AVF's major enlistment challenges each can be placed in one of three bins: the decreasing quality pool of potential recruits, a decreasing willingness among the youth within the public to serve in the military, and the unsustainable costs of today's volunteer force.

Shrinking pool of potential recruits. Recruitment for officer corps talent is relatively sound. However, the main risk to the AVF is recruitment of sufficient quality personnel to fill the enlisted ranks in the face of a dwindling talent pool available to the U.S. military.

Decreasing willingness to serve in the military. To complicate the recruiting challenge, although the military as an institution remains highly regarded by the public, there is clear evidence of declining interest among young Americans to serve in the military. Those who see the AVF's problems in terms of a civil-military divide promote different concepts for service requirements and opportunities for U.S. citizenry. U.S. Rep. Charles Rangel and retired U.S. Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal champion two distinctive approaches. Each proposes a form of national service aimed at youth.

Since 2004, Rangel has regularly introduced legislation to reinstate the military draft; however, it routinely receives little support from colleagues.¹ On the

other hand, as head of the Aspen Institute's Franklin Project, McChrystal is leading a separate effort that aims to make national service more attractive to youth by expanding both opportunities and expectations for voluntary public service.² Rangel's approach abolishes the AVF, replacing it with involuntary service under a draft system; McChrystal's makes the AVF a possible subset of a broader national service voluntary system that provides training and benefits calculated to better attract recruits.

Unsustainable cost of the all-volunteer force.

Some, including members of the Department of Defense (DOD) and Congress, view the AVF issue primarily through a fiscal lens. They aim to save the AVF by finding some way to balance the need to provide increases in competitive compensation and benefits with the ability to pay for the force. Advocates of this approach are exploring compensation reform, focusing on DOD healthcare, retirement, and benefits packages.³ They realize that additional fiscal obligations associated with increases in benefits and pay will be unsustainable in the long run, threatening the overall viability of the AVF.

Broad environmental scanning—the "purposeful search in the environment for relevant information"—enables researchers to see these intersections of the problem and frame it to develop solutions.⁴ Joint doctrine provides the political, military, economic, social, information, and infrastructure (PMESII) construct, which is helpful to analyze and determine such interrelationships.⁵ Although all factors of PMESII influence the viability of the AVF, three are most relevant and are most interrelated: political, military, and social.

The Political Framework: Balancing Quantity and Quality of its New Talent

Congress recognizes that to sustain the U.S. military as a viable and sufficient instrument of national power, a steady and sufficient flow of fully qualified volunteers is required. Congress determines sufficiency by mandating end strength and resourcing the military through budget appropriations.⁶ Congress also establishes through law the minimum quality standards the military can accept in an enlisted recruit.⁷

DOD has long managed this quantity-quality tension with two tools: policy for managing the system, and incentives for acquiring and retaining talent.

DOD manages some policy decisions but delegates most to the services. In difficult recruiting environments, or when trying to grow the enlisted ranks' numbers for a specific purpose, DOD modifies policy to ease quality requirements within the limits of the law. When the recruiting environment improves or when the force needs to get smaller, DOD tightens quality standards to slow or constrain enlistment within fiscal requirements. The services then shape their enlisted forces with appropriate training and assignment depending on talent requirements to accomplish their service-specific roles, missions, and functions.

In the past, when faced with downturns in recruiting, DOD simply adjusted accession policy toward the legally lowest-quality standards. If those steps proved insufficient, the Pentagon requested increased funding for recruiting incentives. Such policies worked well in an environment of robust personnel interest and availability in the population pool. However, circumstances have dramatically changed. A deeper examination of the environment indicates that in 2015 and beyond, no combination of policy-loosening measures or incentive increases will solve the longer-term, systemic problems in acquiring talent the military requires because the talent pool is decreasing while the competition for recruiting talent from the private sector is increasing due to perceptions of better benefits and opportunities.⁸ The

military, and the Army in particular, will be hard pressed to keep up. The Army does not have the capability to expand the quality of the talent pool, nor does it have the resources to sufficiently compete for the remaining talent by offering competitive incentives.

The Emerging Quantity and Quality Problem

The challenge for the services today and in the future is how to maintain the balance between quantity and quality in an era when both appear to be decreasing in the available manpower pool. The traditional course in a tough recruiting environment has been to recruit to the minimum DOD policy standards. This provided the best opportunity to meet the quantity the services required under the assumption that what was lacking in quality could be overcome by additional training. It was recognized that such a policy did put the quality of the force at increased, albeit what was deemed acceptable, risk. Of the services, the Army traditionally has been the most challenged in managing such quantity-quality tension because it is the largest service.

Today, as its end strength is being drawn down, the Army is struggling to enlist the level of talent it needs under current policy management guidance.

Additionally, in a logical but unanticipated turn, the Army is increasing its quality requirements for new recruits in order to grow advanced specialties such as special operations and cyber forces, among others, that demand high-quality recruits with the ability to learn complex skills. By requiring future soldiers to have enhanced mental and physical capabilities as well as to "demonstrate strong moral, ethical, and spiritual beliefs," the Army is seeking even better talent from a pool already straining to meet today's quality demands.⁹ While the Army has yet to define these new capabilities and develop the tools to assess them, the Army's recruiting assumption is clear: to win in the complex future environment, today's quality standards are insufficient for tomorrow's Army. Therefore, the Army faces a predicament. To succeed in future conflicts, it requires higher-quality recruits.



(Photo by Jasmine Chopra-Delgado, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers)
Sgt. Koutodjo Ayivi, a prime power production specialist and contracting officer's technical representative with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' 249th Engineer Battalion, points to electrical equipment 10 August 2013 at the Bagh-E Pol power plant in Kandahar, Afghanistan. The Army faces stiff competition from colleges, other military services, and civilian employers for recruits with the potential to learn complex skills like those of Ayivi.



(Photos by Sgt. Richard Hoppe, 123rd Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

Applicants are sworn into service 7 October 2014 at the Military Entrance Processing Station on Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey.

Yet, it is struggling under current, less rigorous standards to acquire both the quantity and quality it needs today.

Societal Challenges: Drying up the All-Volunteer Force Talent Pool

America wants not only capable men and women to join the military, but also it requires highly motivated volunteers. Americans' regard for their service members continues to be strong relative to other professions; they place military service at the top.¹⁰ However, despite such widespread and sustained public respect, the desire to serve among young people of military age, eighteen to twenty-four years, has slowly but steadily declined.¹¹ Schools, as well as industrial and commercial interests in the civilian sector, recognize the same potential as DOD does in these young people, but they are increasingly better able to better compete for it. As a result, today's potential volunteers have what they might consider more attractive options in the civilian sector than in military service, from college enabled by school loans to a wave of cooperative work-school options near home.

One consequence of the increasing society-wide demand for talent is the trend among civilian recruiters to identify and recruit based on potential, not

developed competency in a given skill. In the 2014 article "21st Century Talent Spotting," international search consultant Claudio Fernández-Aráoz highlights the global demand for high-quality potential as opposed to demonstrated skill development. He recommends companies focus on identifying and recruiting talent based on key aspects of potential, including a person's motivation, determination, and curiosity.¹²

Although Fernández-Aráoz focuses on executive leadership, the military can apply two key conclusions from his observations. First, the talent market at all levels is tightening, with little relief in sight. Second, DOD's talent acquisition model should shift from recruiting for skills to focusing on identifying and recruiting for perceived potential. However, DOD currently has no proven ways to assess potential and then win in the competition for recruits. To highlight the vital need for an improved recruitment system adapted to present circumstances, it is useful to observe that in the talent market of 2016, the military's pipeline for identifying and developing senior military enlisted leaders of 2035—in what most would agree will be a much more complex security environment due to technological advancements and demographic changes—will be rife with competition.



(Photo by Sgt. First Class Rebecca Doucette, Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center)

Sgt. Janiece Marquez, a Pashto linguist, engages members of the Afghan Local Police 1 February 2011 in Kunar Province, Afghanistan. The Army must compete for the 4 percent of Americans who, like Marquez, are willing and qualified to serve.

The Political Challenges: Paying for Talent

To support the military's efforts to recruit talent, Congress has not neglected compensating military service. Since 2001 especially, America's leaders in the executive and legislative branches of government have recognized the challenging requirements of military service, with its increased pace of operations on a global scale. Accordingly, Congress has enabled military recruiters to attract sufficient talent in most years to fill the ranks, in part by increasing pay and benefits for military members and families.

Steady improvements in compensation and benefits have sustained enlisted talent acquisition during very difficult years, especially for the Army. However, one result is that the AVF has become increasingly expensive over the long term. Some would describe paying for the AVF as an economic challenge rather than a political one. But, because Congress is constitutionally required to raise and support the Army and provide and maintain the Navy, these acts are inherently political.¹³

In 2011, then Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta declared military personnel costs unsustainable in the long run: "The fiscal reality facing us means that we have to look at the growth in personnel costs, which are a major driver of budget growth and are, simply

put, on an unsustainable course."¹⁴ Reinforcing Panetta's remarks on personnel expenses, Gen. Martin Dempsey, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in a 2013 joint town hall forum stated, "But compensation ... and health care costs are growing at rates that are unsustainable to the all-volunteer force."¹⁵

As costly as recruiting and sustaining the AVF has become, reformers and policy makers must consider that young people in the talent market have already factored today's military compensation into their decision making. Consider that today's Marine or Army privates receive compensation that puts them in the ninetieth percentile of their societal peer group.¹⁶ Even with ongoing uncertain economic conditions, especially those affect-

ing young adults, today's relatively generous military compensation and benefits package already is priced into the talent market where the military competes each day with businesses and colleges.¹⁷

However, even if the political will existed to appropriate more money to increase military compensation, benefits, or even enlistment bonuses, such incentives would have to alter the market calculus in favor of military enlistment. In terms of budget and relative compensation, the AVF faces strong headwinds if it is to sustain its talent base, much less improve it, by adding fiscal incentives.

To complicate decisions in the current fiscal environment, Congress, with the power of the purse, has little flexibility due to the Budget Control Act of 2011. Without action by both congressional chambers and the president to ease budget constraints, there will be even less flexibility for spending on recruitment. Consequently, while DOD is asking for controls on compensation and benefits, it is also demanding improved quality of its enlistees in the future force—which implies increased compensation. Thus, the political tensions with regard to quality versus quantity are substantial. However, this is just one dimension of the recruiting challenge.

Redefining the Problem

Today, America's military is a professional, world-class, highly recruited, volunteer organization widely respected by its society. Its youngest members are well compensated relative to other Americans their age. But the combination of the military, social, and political factors in the strategic environment leads one to conclude that the AVF cannot survive without fundamental redesign. Demonstrably, Congress currently has no fiscal stomach for enlistment bonuses, nor has the president requested them. Policy shifts by DOD (such as opening enlistment to more non-high-school graduates or accepting more medical and moral waivers) can provide limited help to address recruiting sufficient quantity, but conversely may undercut quality of the force.

For the AVF's long-term viability, the military, the political leaders, and the American people must address a deeper underlying problem: the military cannot satisfy its demand for increasingly qualified enlistees due to societal factors. With obesity at 40 percent for youths ages sixteen to twenty-four, mental- and behavioral-health medications prescribed for 34 percent of youths ages thirteen to seventeen, and arrest rates

among U.S. youths estimated between 25.3 percent and 41.4 percent by age twenty-three, it is clear that enlistment policy adjustments and increases to compensation, benefits, and enlistment incentives are insufficient to resolve the recruiting challenges.¹⁸ The core issue is an increasing societal reluctance, as well as inability for various reasons, among young potential recruits to serve in the military.

Quantifying this problem clarifies the core issues and offers a clearer picture of the competition for talent among businesses, colleges, and the military. Figure 1 illustrates the AVF problem using DOD and U.S. Army Recruiting Command data for the 4.1 million Americans turning eighteen in 2015.¹⁹ About four of every one hundred of these young Americans are both qualified and willing to serve. Colleges and other postsecondary education and training institutions, the military, and employers vie for them; the military needs at least one to enlist, and traditional colleges will draw at least two of the four. Of the remaining ninety-six, twenty-five are qualified but unwilling to serve, and fifteen are unqualified but willing. Remaining are about fifty-six Americans who are both unwilling and unable to serve

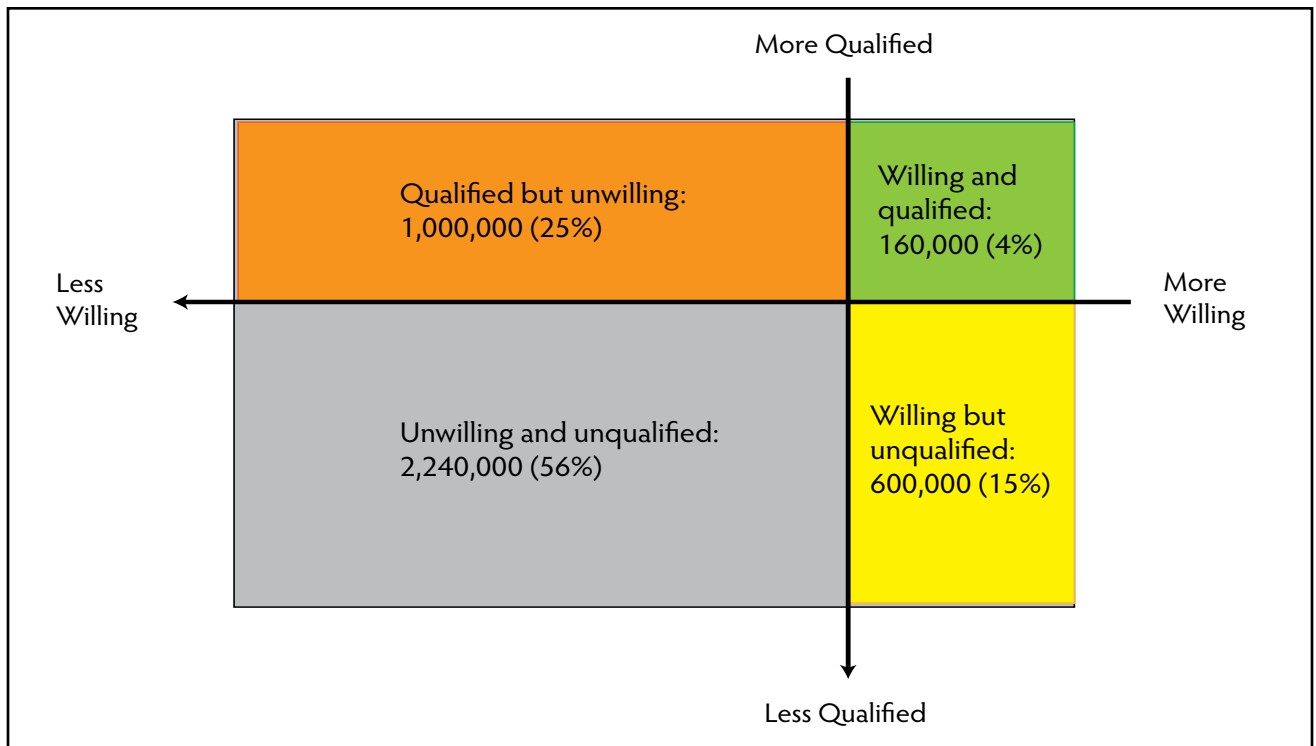


Figure 1. The All-Volunteer Force's Strategic Problem

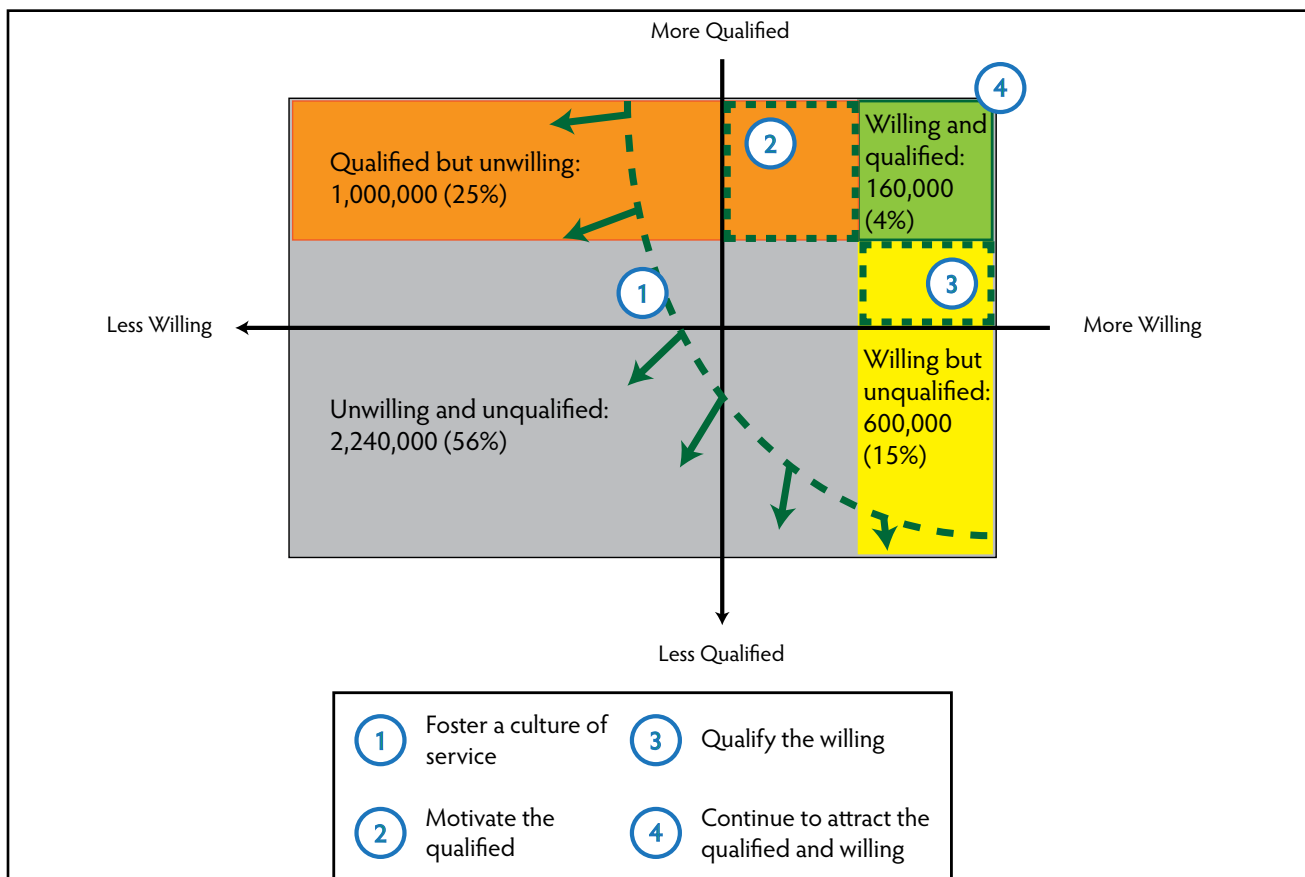


Figure 2. The Approach Applied to the Problem

under today’s standards. Currently, only 4.3 percent of young people are both willing and qualified to serve in the military, and that number is declining. To make matters worse, this dynamic situation is trending in the wrong direction for the AVF. Figure 1 illustrates the long-term movement toward both decreased willingness as well as decreased qualification to serve (figure 1, down and left). As DOD’s demand for highly qualified, motivated young talent continues, competition for talent represented in figure 1’s upper right quadrant becomes even more challenging. Long-term solutions must address the trends in both quality and quantity, but any redesign of the AVF must account for the deep tensions between the military and social aspects of the problem. Failure to do so threatens any future approach.

Expanding the Talent Pool of Willing and Qualified: Four Lines of Effort

A redesigned AVF requires a holistic approach aimed at long-term, systemic issues to ensure an

accessible talent pool of qualified and willing young adults to serve in the military. Accomplishing this requires decisive change without violating the fundamental interests of two key AVF stakeholders: the military and society. For example, the military will not sacrifice the principle that uniformed recruits be sufficiently intelligent, physically sound and capable, and morally fit for the demands of military life. Similarly, the approach should not require society to forego preparing young people for college or other high-value opportunities.

Figure 2 illustrates a holistic approach that would use four lines of effort to engage each quadrant of the problem diagram introduced in figure 1. This approach would renew the AVF’s long-term viability and account for military and societal factors—for each stakeholder’s core interests.

First, at the policy level, the U.S. leadership must begin cultivating a culture of voluntary national service that includes as many young people as possible, regardless of willingness or qualification to serve.

Second, among those one million eighteen-year-olds qualified to serve but unwilling (top left), policy makers must devise means for incentivizing such service by aligning the desires of the unwilling with national interests, of which a high quality military is one.

Third, steps must be taken to qualify those willing to serve but who today cannot fully qualify (bottom right). To enhance the process, the military must develop more refined methodologies for a talent-spotting and vetting process, akin to what Special Forces employ to identify and select their talent today. For example, the Junior Officer Reserve Corps programs provide both a history and a mechanism that could help such an effort.

Fourth, and finally, the military should employ its legacy tools for continuing to pursue and attract the already high-quality, highly motivated young people the Nation seeks today (top right). Though many of such talented young men and women want to serve in the military, they still need to be actively recruited, or many will be enticed by agents of other organizations who put forth the interest and effort to recruit them.

An approach that proceeds along these four lines of effort can arrest and then reverse the drift toward fewer and fewer qualified and willing young men and women by expanding the pool of those qualified and willing to serve the Nation, both in military and civilian capacities. In doing so, the AVF's enlisted talent requirements are more likely to receive long-term, sustainable support from both society and the military, as well as political leaders. More detailed proposals with development of appropriate ways and means along these four lines of effort are still needed. Due to space limitations, this article has only identified the challenges and suggested starting points for broader and deeper analysis leading to a redesign of the AVF.

Conclusion

Divergent military, societal, and political forces risk the AVF's future viability. Although America likes its

volunteer force, the military is attempting to drive it to higher quality through recruitment even as society is showing it will not sustain the military's steady call for volunteers. To be sure, many dedicated and experienced leaders in DOD, Congress, and across society have and will continue to support the AVF. But few are aware of, or acknowledge, the degree and power of current tensions on the AVF's foundational structures.

The DOD commitment to conduct a holistic review of the AVF is a necessary start. However, national inattention thus far to recruitment of enlisted talent risks reliance on quick fixes without addressing the fundamental issues. Further analysis must integrate the relationships among the military, the government, and the society, with special focus on fiscal issues such as pay and compensation.

U.S. political leaders are charged with managing these tensions and forging practical solutions. In developing a more long-term approach to the AVF's enlisted talent acquisition, future efforts must be acceptable to key stakeholders. They must assign responsibility, propose objectives, and develop basic assessment tools to monitor the AVF's viability and account for changes in the broad system. Redesigning the future AVF must begin at the beginning: with the young men and women who join the ranks. All those involved with DOD talent acquisition effort must pitch in: military, societal, and political leaders.

The call for a redesign of America's AVF is timely; the very life of today's high-quality force is at stake. Time, however, is not our ally. Our nation needs a concerted, whole-of-nation approach to successfully complete a reform of the AVF. The solution must account for the pervasive problems, especially with enlisted talent acquisition, without killing what makes the military so venerated and potent today. Those undertaking this task should gain encouragement in this: Americans can agree they want their all-volunteer force, and they want it healthy and good and strong for the long haul. For the force's redesign, this is a solid foundation. ■

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