



Maj. Gen. Matthew Baker (*right*), commanding general, 88th Readiness Division, administers the oath of enlistment to more than thirty future soldiers during a ceremony prior to a 29 August 2022 Minnesota Twins baseball game in Minneapolis. (Photo by Zach Mott, U.S. Army)

Fifty Years Strong

The All-Volunteer Force of the United States Military and Resolving the Recruiting Crisis

Alan Chase Cunningham

For most of American military history, the U.S. Armed Forces have had some kind of conscription process in place. From the American Revolution against the British to the Vietnam War, Americans experienced some form of conscription into the country's military forces, whether administered by the federal or state governments. However, while conscription was a fact of life in many of the U.S. conflicts, the United States has still overwhelmingly been an all-volunteer force, which has been the dominant method of military recruiting for decades.

In the past few years, the effectiveness of an all-volunteer force (AVF) has been discussed. While largely resigned to the periphery of national defense debate, the issue has been pushed to the forefront on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the United States' creation of an AVF.

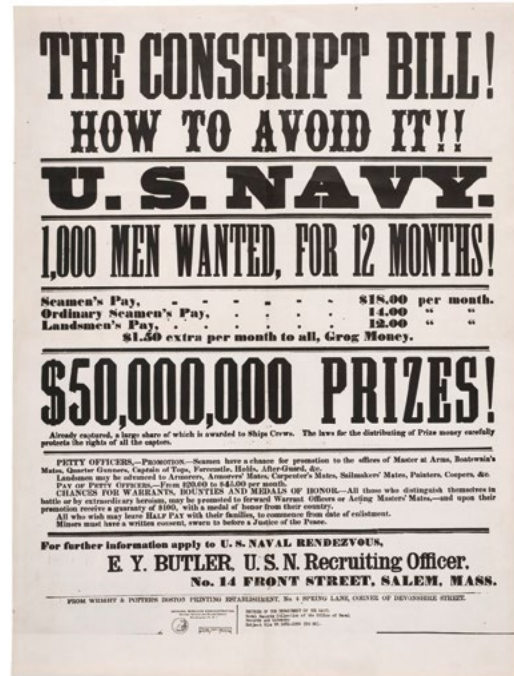
In mid-2022, problems with the U.S. Armed Forces' recruiting goals became clear, with all the branches showing signs of stress as “a record low percentage of young Americans [are] eligible to serve and an even tinier fraction willing to consider it.”¹ By 2022's end, the recruiting crisis became clear to all.

According to *War on the Rocks*, the “Army missed its recruiting goal by 15,000 active-duty soldiers, or 25 percent of its target,” while other branches “all accelerated their delayed entry applicants at the end of the last fiscal year, leaving them with a far shallower pool to draw from this year.”² The U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force explicitly took advantage of unique marketing techniques to fill their ranks in addition to “[offering] extensive financial bonuses” and raising the age of enlistment.³

With this crisis consuming much of the U.S. military's time and effort, some have commented that an old solution is needed to address the failing recruiting numbers: replace the AVF with a system of conscription, or draft, of some type. While this recommendation has gained popularity amongst defense officials and the public alike, this short-term solution does not promise to resolve all the issues it claims to solve and weakens America's defenses rather than strengthens them.

Conscription, the Draft, and the United States

Historically, the draft has been more constant during wartime rather than peacetime. According to *Encyclopædia Britannica*, George Washington, commander in chief of the Continental Army,



The U.S. Navy used the threat of the draft and the possibility of prize money to encourage men to enlist. (Photo courtesy of the Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library)

recommended to the Continental Congress that “the central government be given the power to conscript soldiers,” an authority normally given to what were then the colonies. Congress quickly denied Washington.⁴ During the War of 1812, President James Madison called for a conscripted military force of one hundred thousand men, yet the plan was quickly shot down by Congress.⁵

In the 1860s, during the U.S. Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln “imposed a draft, a move that provoked riots in New York and other cities,” though the majority of the individuals who served in the conflict were volunteers.⁶ While this system did allow the United States to gain a substantial amount of manpower in defense of the Constitution, there were many flaws, namely the process by which the wealthy and privileged would pay others to go to war in their place.

When World War I arose, the United States developed the Selective Service System explicitly

Alan Chase Cunningham is a doctoral student at the University of Birmingham's Department of History. He holds an MA from Norwich University and a BA and BS from the University of Texas at Austin.

to resolve some of the issues with the draft instituted during the Civil War and worked to build up a military force quickly.⁷ Just prior to the Second World War, in 1940, the United States again instituted a draft to keep up with enemy military forces.⁸ By the war's end in 1945, due to the Korean War and the beginning of the Cold War, "men were drafted to fill vacancies in the Armed Forces which could not be filled through voluntary means."⁹ This peacetime draft continued for twenty-three years before ending when "Congress refused to extend" the draft law following the Vietnam War.¹⁰

The RAND Corporation, in a 2006 research brief, found a series of reasons why the U.S. public turned against the draft. Some of these reasons are due to the military's need for soldiers outweighing the overall eligible male population, the total cost of maintaining such a military force constantly, the public's growing negative sentiments and resentment against the Vietnam War, and an internal desire by the military to adjust its recruiting and retention strategy as morale was at an all-time low and there was a perception of poor discipline among most draftees.¹¹

These sentiments became more apparent with the conclusion of the Gates Commission, a 1969 commission set up by President Richard Nixon to ascertain if the conscription service was warranted, which "concluded that the nation's interests would be better served by an all-volunteer force than by a combination of volunteers and conscripts."¹²

Since 1973, the United States has been an all-volunteer force, with conscription still carrying the taint of the Vietnam conflict. Despite this, the AVF has also, in some cases fairly, faced criticism.

Firstly, the switch from a draft system to the AVF was not an easy path, with some believing "that every young man had a moral obligation to serve in the military, while others were concerned that [the military] was attracting a low-quality force overrepresented by the poor and minorities."¹³ Some critics, namely those expressing concern over the military overrepresented by minorities and the economically disadvantaged, have argued this prevalence of economically and socially disadvantaged persons "raise[s] the issue of whether the United States does actually have an AVF or whether the draft

World War I draft card of Ben Kubelsky (aka Jack Benny) (Photo courtesy of the National Archives)

has simply become more complex" and advocated for a system in which "the burden of war should be distributed more equally among all socioeconomic classes."¹⁴

Another criticism of the AVF has been that it has resulted "a civil-military disconnect in service that allows for military adventurism and long-running wars such as Iraq and Afghanistan, a lack of diversity in geography, race, gender, and socioeconomic status and limits on effectively drawing from the widest and deepest pool of qualified candidates."¹⁵

These same critics argue for various solutions, from conscripting all individuals for certain set periods of time and release from their contracts if actively deployed overseas to only conscripting eligible individuals within "the top 10 percent" of the income tax bracket.¹⁶ The rationale is "that those within reach of the levers of power would be more inclined to limit military involvement if their own children faced drafting and deployment."¹⁷ These calls for a draft have grown substantially over the past few months and become heavily amplified, while others have even taken a more conspiratorial



"I Want You" by James Montgomery Flagg, 1940. (Photo courtesy of the National Archives Recruiting Bureau)

view in their commentaries on the situation.¹⁸ Many former defense officials, from commissioned general officers to high-level civilians, have advocated for a conscription system of some kind.¹⁹ In response to most of this, the U.S. Department of Defense has said the AVF "remains the best model for the U.S. military."²⁰

These arguments for bringing back a draft in some format goes beyond the political divide, attracting individuals from the political left who desire to see an end to costly conflicts abroad and individuals on the political right who envision a stronger America to wage war with both China and Iran. However, bringing back a draft would neither solve endless wars nor make the U.S. military better prepared for armed conflicts that may arise, nor would it resolve a socioeconomic disparity in recruiting.

Why Conscription Will Not Work for Gen Z and the Twenty-First Century

Conscription, in many ways, would be ineffective in the coming conflicts of the twenty-first century and likely in any conflict going forward. Looking at the above criticisms levied at the AVF, it would seem the main arguments for a draft can be surmised into three main points: (1) it would make for a more socioeconomically, ethnically, racially diverse force; (2) it would halt adventurism by current political parties, politicians, and general officers or limit the amount to which military force would be a first response in responding to international crises; and (3) it would make for a stronger, mightier military force with a constant state of preparedness. However, while impressive and convincing on the surface, these arguments fall apart after discussion and close examination.

The first point, which would provide for a fairer and just national defense force in a demographic sense, was a point of discussion when the Gates Commission was crafting its report for Nixon. The Vietnam War had led to a disproportionate number of African American and Hispanic conscripts serving in combat and suffering casualty rates higher than whites so this was a hot topic for many minority communities and their elected representatives going into the Nixon administration.²¹ The Gates Commission found the following:

The composition of the armed forces will not be fundamentally changed by ending conscription ... The argument that blacks would bear an unfair share of the burden of an all-volunteer force confounds service by free choice with compulsory service ... Blacks who join a voluntary force presumably have decided for themselves that military service is preferable to the other alternatives available to them. They regard military service as a more rewarding opportunity, not as a burden.²²

The current all-volunteer military is a vastly diverse force from a racial, ethnic, and gender standpoint, with a growing rise in minorities serving in combat and combat support roles and steadily on the way to becoming more representative of American societal demographics.²³ While there remains a disparity in the amount of racial diversity in the general officer corps,

for other minority groups, the path toward military service has exploded in the past fifty years.²⁴

Furthermore, during the Iraq War, the Congressional Budget Office undertook an examination of disproportionality of casualties amongst racial lines in 2006 and found “racial and ethnic representation of personnel deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan was similar to that of the overall enlisted force ... Data on fatalities indicate that minorities are not being killed in those operations at greater rates than their representation in the force. Rather, fatalities of white service members have been higher than their representation in the force.”²⁵

Professor Louis G. Yuengert of the U.S. Army War College, writing in a 2015 issue of *Parameters*, argued that the AVF directly impacted the number of women serving in the Armed Forces, finding that the percentage of women in the Armed Forces increased by 12.7 percent in a forty-year period while also leading “to changes in policy and a much slower change in culture that has paralleled the society’s changing view of the role of women in the workplace.”²⁶ This has surpassed the Gates Commission’s own view of how far the AVF would be able to bring women into the military. While inequalities still need to be addressed, the AVF has substantially exceeded the commission’s own intents and best-case scenarios for women and other minorities.

Regarding socioeconomic status, the AVF has not included a disproportionate number of individuals from a lower socioeconomic bracket. In fact, in direct contradiction to this theory, the military is now overwhelmingly made up of volunteers from greater income brackets. In 2008, conservative think tank the Heritage Foundation identified that in the two years prior (during the Iraq War’s surge years), enlisted recruits were coming from affluent families; this trend has been identified in more recent years by the non-partisan think tank the Council on Foreign Relations.²⁷ There has been substantial discussion on how a military career is no longer a pathway for lower-class members to transcend into the middle class but rather how it has become a path for middle-class individuals to reach the upper middle or high class.²⁸

Phil Carter, a professor of law with an academic focus on conscription at Georgetown University and a former Department of Defense official during the later years of the Iraq War, stated, “There is no evidence (a draft) would do any better now versus during Vietnam

... I don’t think we could do it well today and we would likely replicate most of the representative issues.”²⁹

The second argument states that the draft would halt military adventurism or allow for more careful consideration before committing combat troops, but this also does not hold up to the historical record. David Nasca, a career officer with the U.S. Marine Corps who authored a 2019 master’s thesis in political science from Virginia Tech, discussed the AVF and the president’s authorization of military force. Nasca analyzed multiple historical conflicts in the post-Vietnam era and writes that the AVF “became more responsive to elected officials and the American public.”³⁰ More contemporary interventions in Libya and Syria were “quickly curtailed by backlash against making large military commitments” while the president himself “had to weigh their political and military decisions based on how the American public would react when using the AVF as seen in the Gulf War, Somalia, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq.”³¹ This showed rather conclusively that “the creation of the AVF did not give presidents freedom of action to use military force as they saw fit.”³²

Finally, others argue that the AVF is not as effective as a conscript force would be, stating that if the United States became involved in countering China, Russia, or North Korea, “the military today is likely unable to meet all these commitments.”³³ Those supportive of the AVF question how well the AVF would fare against such nation-state forces.

The Gates Commission’s statements identified this desire for a mass number of individuals to serve in times of crisis and considered the National Guard and Reserve forces to be substantial in carrying out this task. Yet it “recommended a standby draft which can be put into effect promptly if circumstances require mobilization of large numbers of men”; this became the Selective Service System.³⁴ This system has many problems and seriously lacks in reform in many places, yet it provides an ample supply of individuals who, in the event of serious national emergency, would be able to be called up to serve.³⁵

One of the main reasons why conscription was effective in the past was that it was used during times of immense geopolitical crisis—in particular, during times of armed conflict. Consider that the times in which the draft has been in effect have been during

the U.S. Civil War, perhaps the greatest domestic struggle the United States has been through, and during several conflicts, most notably the First and Second World Wars.

These events were instances of great global significance; they were times in which most of the world was involved in combat operations or when internal domestic strife had reached an all-time, violent high. The draft was highly effective in instances when a substantial military force was needed to engage in these missions and defend international security or preserve U.S. democracy. This historical context cannot be ignored when discussing a renewal of the draft.

In a substantial geopolitical crisis involving standing militaries, a draft would likely be reintroduced. However, one cannot forget that “conscription works only when there is broad, bipartisan support for a draft” with such events like the 1863 New York riots and the antiwar protests of the 1960s remaining clear in the minds of many Americans.³⁶ As can be seen in numerous opinion pieces and commentaries from individuals across the political spectrum, the draft would be an incredibly unpopular policy to put in place and would not improve the military but instead, damage it.³⁷

Forcing individuals to serve in the Armed Forces who do not desire to be in the military clearly does not serve a nation well. Morale in the military would quickly plummet, and there is the potentiality that conscripted individuals could perform their duties as maliciously compliant as possible.³⁸ If forced into combat, many soldiers might again perform their roles with malicious compliance, engage in unethical behavior more readily than an AVF and would likely make for ineffective soldiers regardless of their branch or assignment.³⁹ The history of conscription in the modern era suggests this, with prime examples coming from the Vietnam War and Russia’s recent actions during its invasion of Ukraine.⁴⁰

Furthermore, the military, if moving to a fully conscript basis, would still experience an issue in gaining recruits as many of the draft-eligible American populace would be disqualified from the Armed Forces just as they are precluded from enlistment now (due to a wide variety of reasons such as health and weight). Additionally, to accommodate this influx of troops, the military would need to find additional locations to house, train, and

equip these individuals, something the Department of Defense already has issues with.

Finally, consider the fact that the military, at its current strength, is home to a whole host of issues including sexual assault, an unequal military justice system, an overloaded security clearance and classification system, and families and soldiers constantly on the move. Placing more individuals into this system via a draft, with this many systemic issues, could result in a further overburdened military and overwhelm the military even more than it already is.

Keeping the All-Volunteer Force Viable into the 2020s

It should be clear that a draft is not a viable solution to resolving the military’s recruiting woes. The AVF still remains the primary method for a standing military force in the United States and should be kept as such. To solve the military’s recruiting crisis, however, it comes down largely to how the Armed Forces recruit individuals into their organizations and remains relevant to this new generation of soldiers.

The national security-oriented think tank CNA writes that the armed services must “adapt their recruiting practices with each generational change [and] deal with a new cohort of Generation Zs who think differently than the previous generation (Millennials), and recruiters must find effective ways of reaching them in a very fragmented media market.”⁴¹ This is in addition to having recruiters search for quality personnel instead of instituting quotas that promote gaining recruits who would not best serve the Armed Forces.⁴² And, the standards of the Armed Forces must be altered.

By this, I contend the standards of the Armed Forces should not be lowered but altered. Three foreign policy fellows who write for the Brookings Institution, all of whom retired at the field- or midgrade levels, describe that the military should “more frequently review the standards” highlighting the U.S. Navy’s raising of its age limit and the U.S. Air Force’s new policy of revisiting drug tests as “a key component to saving the all-volunteer force [in] finding ways to make ineligible candidates who still want to volunteer become eligible.”⁴³

While there has been the claim that many Americans do not have a clear idea of what the military does and what benefits it can offer, I disagree with this

assertion.⁴⁴ Many Americans are familiar with what benefits the military offers (e.g., accelerated citizenship, money for college) and how the military can be a pathway for lifting oneself out of one's current socioeconomic class. New generations and potential recruits simply do not find that the benefits outweigh the risks of serving in the military. And by risks, I do not mean involvement in combat operations or serving abroad.

Sexual assaults against service members are continually on the rise while prosecutions of sexual offenders continue to steadily fall.⁴⁵ Military families continue to suffer from unaffordable housing while constant moves across states puts an immense strain upon the family and spouses.⁴⁶ The rise of extremism and the military's inefficiencies against such extremist individuals and organizations coupled with the rising politicization of the military by right-wing politicians all are very substantial cons for recruits against military service.⁴⁷

The issues plaguing the military go far deeper than a superficial fix by changing from recruiting methods. The system's inherent issues must be resolved or minimized to accommodate the next generation better and to improve the retention rate for our current military force.

Conclusion

Conscription as a replacement for the AVF is simply an unworkable strategy. The entire conscription effort relies upon two primary factors to be truly effective:

immense geopolitical crisis and broad public support. Having a standing conscription or draft would prove to be unpopular with the majority of the public if not involved in a major geopolitical crisis, which is becoming more unlikely, though not impossible. Simply put, instituting a draft during peacetime would impose "social and human costs by distorting the personal lives and career plans of the young and by forcing society to deal with such difficult problems," exactly as the Gates Commission first identified in 1969.⁴⁸

Finally, the military's current issues would be exacerbated by a draft, not minimized by it. If anything, many of the problems proponents of a draft claim one would solve would be intensified while the already substantial problems the military faces would further be strained.⁴⁹ Maintaining the current AVF system while expanding and adjusting the recruitment model for a completely new and foreign generation is a must clearly, but resolving the deep-seated and problematic issues the fighting force currently faces which affects all soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen is a necessity to solving the national defense recruiting crisis. ■

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