



Lt. Col. Richard A. Montcalm, commander of 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, leads recruits in the Oath of Enlistment on 18 April 2023 at the Douthitt Gunnery Complex on Fort Riley, Kansas. (Photo by Sgt. Jared Simmons, U.S. Army)

Reimagining America's Professional All-Volunteer Army

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Today's senior civilian and military Army leaders face a challenge, different from but as complex and pressing as the one their post-Vietnam predecessors tackled: What should America's Army look like? During the Vietnam War, the United States relied on the deeply unpopular draft. By the early 1970s, social, political, economic, technological, and strategic conditions within the United States converged, leading to the conclusion that America needed a *professional volunteer* force. Both adjectives are important. The force created at the end of the Vietnam War became volunteer, but it took years to evolve into the professional Army that fought the First Gulf War. That Army has served the Nation well. However, conditions have changed significantly since the end of the Cold War and the winding down of America's

post-9/11 wars. Now the Nation is in a multipolar, great-power period, and it is time to reexamine, perhaps even reimagine, the

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relationship between America's Army—Active, Guard, and Reserve—and the contextual conditions that shape it.

The professional volunteer Army emerged fifty years ago, and since then, contextual conditions have changed; as a result, there are major issues senior leaders face today.

Phase I. End of the Vietnam War to the Conclusion of the First Gulf War: Converging Conditions

By 1970, American society had rejected the Vietnam War and the draft that fed it. Why this rejection came about has been the topic of books, conferences, and studies for decades. While academics and strategists disagreed as to the cause of this rejection, all agreed that a professional volunteer force would better serve America. Ending the draft was done relatively quickly in 1973, but recruiting and building a professional Army took much longer.

The volunteer force. Bernard Rostker's *I Want You! The Evolution of the All-Volunteer Force* captures the story of how the Army adapted.¹ Rostker's book is a thorough account of transforming a conscription-based personnel system into a recruited-based one that fit its strategic and domestic context. It is a fascinating story involving sets of senior leaders in Congress, the White House, and the Pentagon that detail multiple studies and the vast amount of work required by political and military staffs. *I Want You!* demonstrates that the shift to a recruited-based Army evolved over multiple years and multiple administrations—assisted by a Congress that had 80 percent of senators and 74 percent of representatives who had worn the uniform.²

In close coordination with Congress, Army leadership first focused on adjusting personnel policies. Among the most dramatic were changes to the Army's pay and benefit systems that had to become competitive with the civilian market because the Army, corporate America, and college admissions departments were now competing for the same pool of high-quality high school graduates.

The Army is not platform-based; it is people-based. So, to establish a volunteer Army, senior leaders began recruiting and retaining those who met the new standards. The U.S. Army Recruiting Command had to reorganize itself, educate its



workforce, design a marketing campaign, and execute it. The Army settled upon “Be All You Can Be,” which resonated with potential recruits and those serving. With a smart marketing campaign, the right set of bonuses and incentives, competitive pay and compensation packages, the Army slowly filled itself with high-quality, initial-entry soldiers.

Recruiting and retention had to mesh, however. An increase in the number of married soldiers and junior sergeants was one of the big effects of creating a volunteer force. Senior Army leaders understood that they recruited individuals but retained families. Retaining families meant adapting personnel policies, creating family-centered services, and improving the overall quality of life on Army posts. A soldier’s spouse and family viewed retirement, medical, commissary, post exchange, daycare, and educational benefits as important parts of the attractiveness of service and offsets to the risks and demands inherent to a soldier’s life. As the years progressed, the number of two-soldier and single-parent families increased. Over time, the Army also

Secretary of State Dr. Henry Kissinger (*lower left*) and Le Duc Tho (*upper right*) initial the Paris Peace Accords on 23 January 1973 in Paris. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird followed the signing by announcing, “I wish to inform you that the Armed Forces henceforth will depend exclusively on volunteer soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines.” (Photo from the White House via Alamy)

realized that deploying a family-centric Army meant creating organizations, procedures, and services that could support families when one or both soldier-parents were gone. Spouses and families were very keen to understand how they would be taken care of when their soldier-spouse or soldier-parent deployed.

A very important but little-understood personnel cost associated with the volunteer Army concerned the expansion of the Army’s civilian workforce, which grew to do garrison jobs soldiers had previously performed. In the draft era, a normal year included training, readiness, and support cycles. In the support cycle, soldiers did garrison chores—cut grass; guarded various places on post; and provided augmentation to various garrison activities like gyms, theaters, and other



AH-64 Apache



M1 Abrams



UH-60 Black Hawk



MIM-104 Patriot



M2 Bradley

(Composite graphic by Beth A. Warrington, *Military Review*)

The Big Five

administrative and morale and welfare operations. The volunteer soldier expected to do the job they volunteered for, the job the Nation was paying them to do.

A professional force. Senior Army leaders learned from their own experiences in Vietnam that the Army must become a professional force defined by its values and performance.³ In 1970, the chief of staff of the Army directed the Army War College to study the status of professionalism in the force.⁴ The study found a significant gap between a desired climate characterized by “individual integrity, mutual trust and confidence, unselfish motivation, technical competence, and unconstrained flow of information” and the existing climate perceived as embodying

selfish behavior that places personal success ahead of the good of the Service, looking upward to please superiors instead of looking downward to fulfill the legitimate needs of subordinates, preoccupation with the attainment of trivial short-term objectives even through dishonest practices that injure the long-term fabric of the organization, incomplete communications between junior and senior leaders which leave the senior uninformed and the junior feeling unimportant,

and inadequate technical or managerial competence to perform effectively.⁵

The study concluded that the “fix” to these problems was complex, would take time, and would hinge on Army senior leaders taking the initiative. In response to this study, for over fifteen years, several chiefs of staff and other senior leaders—in close coordination with the secretary of the Army, Department of Defense, and Congress—executed a set of programs to create the high-quality, highly trained, professional force that they envisioned. It meant that the Army’s senior leaders had to transform many of its major systems and institutions and in some cases, create new ones.⁶

A huge part of the transformation involved reorienting its fighting focus from counterinsurgency fighting to the conventional wars in Central Europe and Korea. That mindset change demanded that the Army develop and field new fighting doctrine and ensure that doctrine would take advantage of the modern equipment fielded in the late 1970s and 80s: the M1 Abrams tank, the M2/3 Bradley, the UH-60 Black Hawk, the AH-64 Apache, and the Patriot (known collectively as “the Big 5”). Fielding this equipment was part of reorienting the Army from Vietnam to Central Europe—the main strategic requirement of the time. The reorientation

consisted not only of fielding new equipment and new fighting doctrine but also adopting a new training methodology and revamping the leader (officer and noncommissioned officer) development programs.

Most of the concepts for the Big 5 were born in the 1960s as replacements for second-generation World War II equipment. As the Vietnam War came to an end, the need for this new generation of equipment became more urgent. By the early 1970s, the Army was ill-prepared to defend NATO. Its equipment was out of date. The cascading fielding of the Big 5 took many years. As each unit was “modernized,” however, the process excited both soldiers and leaders. All saw old equipment turned in as symbolic of moving from under the shadow of Vietnam toward becoming a new Army.

The Army’s new fighting doctrine unfolded iteratively. First came “Active Defense” in 1976, a doctrine developed in response to the technologies and tactics used in the 1973 Yom Kippur War.⁷ Although ultimately rejected by the Army, the Active Defense doctrine spurred leaders at every level to think more rigorously about fighting a technologically enhanced, lethal, conventional war. This thinking—in conjunction with the fielding of a massive set of new equipment, the influx of high-quality soldiers, improvements in leader

development, and enhancement of pay and compensation—all combined to invigorate the Army.

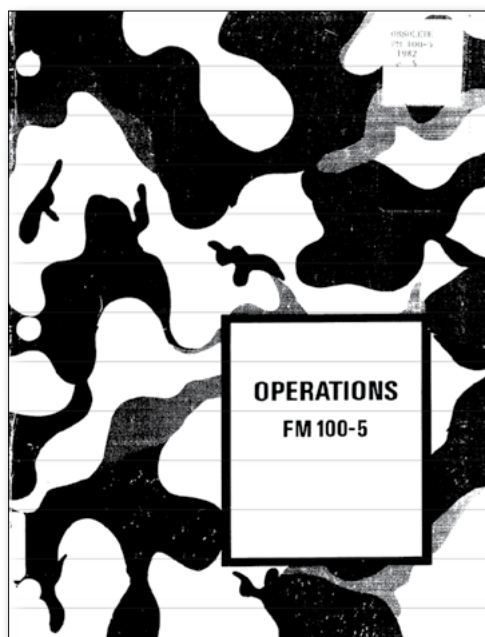
Ultimately, the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command—a new command created in 1973—produced AirLand Battle doctrine in 1982, which would be central to everything the Army did for the next several decades.⁸ Like fielding the Big 5, AirLand Battle doctrine energized Army leaders. The doctrine taught combat, combat support, and combat service commanders how to integrate their efforts at each echelon and between echelons. The tenets of the doctrine—initiative, agility, depth, and synchronization—drove new approaches in training and leader development.

The importance and effect of the Army’s adopting a revolutionary training methodology is hard to overstate five decades after its implementation. Today, the changes the Army made in the mid-1970s to mid-1980s are viewed as routine, the way the Army has always done business. It was not so at the start.⁹

The first major shift in the Army’s approach to training was to change from time based (e.g., two weeks allocated to platoon training) to standards based (e.g., platoons will train on the following tasks until their performance meets prescribed standards). This was called performance-oriented training. All training—from initial entry through every echelon of individual and collective training—became performance, not time, oriented. It is not an understatement to say that the shift in training philosophy was the foundation of America’s professional Army.¹⁰

The second major shift in training directed that all units derive their training focus from their wartime missions. This was called the mission-essential task list (METL). All units of the same type would no longer train on the same tasks—for example, all tank platoons across the Army training on the same generic platoon tasks. Instead, every unit in the Army would train on the tasks they were expected to execute in the warfighting plans designed for Central Europe or Korea. Using this focus, training took on a new sense of urgency and relevancy.

Third, training went from top-down directed to a mixture of top-down and bottom-up. For example, a division might conduct a major training exercise that would include several division-level, mission-essential tasks. But in preparation for this exercise, brigade, battalion, company commanders as well as platoon and squad leaders conducted their training meetings to determine which



Field Manual 100-5, *Operations* (1982)



of their METL tasks would be their focus during the division exercise. Further, in conjunction with the other NCOs within their units, unit command sergeants major would identify which individual tasks they would evaluate during collective training. This was called multiechelon training. This shift ensured leaders at every level understood what they were going to do in training and why.

Next, the new training doctrine required that all training would be planned, prepared, executed, evaluated, and redone, if necessary, until all tasks were performed to standard.¹¹ Planning took place via a set of nested training meetings during which the leader or commander reviewed the individual, leader, and collective tasks; identified which tasks they had to perform; ensured the training resources were available to set the right conditions for training; and allocated sufficient time to perform to standard and retrain if necessary. The doctrine stipulated that primary trainers were two echelons above the training unit. In other words, battalion commanders ensured that platoons were properly trained; brigade commanders, companies; and division commanders, battalions, etc. This two-echelon method reinforced the Army's desire for all leaders to be able to use their initiative and act within the intent of senior leaders two levels above.¹²

Soldiers move forward with a Stryker Combat Vehicle in support 31 October 2019 during Decisive Action Rotation 20-02 at the National Training Center in Fort Irwin, California. (Photo by Brooke Davis, U.S. Army)

Senior commanders executed their responsibilities by first planning training during quarterly, semiannual, and annual training briefs. Second, they created the conditions for all tasks to be performed under realistic conditions. Finally, they personally observed and evaluated training. Evaluation took place through brutally honest, unit-led after action reviews to ensure training standards were met or the task redone.

The capstone collective training events for brigades and below were conducted at combat training centers (CTC). The first of the Army's CTCs was the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California—announced in 1979 and activated in 1980. Later, the Army opened the Joint Readiness Training Center, first located at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, then moved to Fort Polk, Louisiana. The last CTC was the Combat Maneuver Training Center at Hohenfels, Germany. Units would deploy to these CTCs to execute selected METL tasks, fighting against an aggressive opposing force and

observed by highly qualified observer/controllers that were permanently stationed at the CTC. It was the ultimate test, meant to clearly identify shortcomings in unit home-station training.

Division and corps commanders were put under the warfighting microscope too, but mostly in constructed reality rather than in live exercises. The Army created the Battle Command Training Program (BCTP, now called the Mission Command Training Program). Via computer generated scenarios, division and corps commanders “fought” an opposing force as proficient as those in the live CTCs. This program evaluated the state of training of division and corps commanders and their staffs. CTCs and the BCTP ensured that no soldier, leader, or unit would go unevaluated. This new approach to training radically improved the quality of performance throughout the Army.

To lead volunteers, create professionals, and execute the new training doctrine, the Army needed to upgrade its leader development programs for both officers and NCOs. The Army adopted a “select-train-promote” methodology and a “Be, Know, Do” approach to accomplish this upgrade. Army values—ultimately standardized as loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage—were woven into the fabric of professional education curricula and officer and NCO efficiency reports.

Battalion-and-above commanders were centrally selected at the Department of the Army level against Army-wide standards, and command tours were lengthened and standardized. For NCOs, central selection began at the staff sergeant. Further, at each level of professional education, officers and NCOs were taught what they had to be (character), know (skills), and do (behaviors) appropriate for the level of responsibility they were to assume.

The officer education program expanded, including a company command course, a battalion staff course, and a precommand course for commanders of battalions and above—these in addition to officer basic courses, the Command and General Staff Course for majors, and the War Colleges for lieutenant colonels. The Army’s School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS), a school for competitively selected majors and an even smaller set of lieutenant colonels, was one of the most important innovations in officer education. Maj. Gen. Robert H. Scales described this school in *Certain Victory* as a place where majors “would study the art of war in an intensive program of reading,

military history, practicing computer wargames, and writing extensively.”¹³ “By the time of the Gulf War,” Scales reported, “SAMS graduates had established a reputation as some of the best staff officers in the Army.”¹⁴

The NCO education system was completely overhauled. As an NCO develops, the scope of his or her responsibility expands as well, so the Army developed an education program that matched this reality. At each level, sergeants learn the theory and practice of leadership appropriate to the rank and responsibilities the NCO will assume. The Army established common curricula for every level of NCO leadership: a Basic Leadership Course for sergeants, an Advanced Leadership Course for staff sergeants, and a Senior Leadership Course for sergeants first class. Later, the Army created a Sergeants Major Academy and other leadership courses to ensure continued leadership education for the NCO corps. Ultimately, command sergeants major were included in the precommand course formerly just for the commanders, thus emphasizing the command team concept. All these programs were key to professionalizing the NCO corps and help it become capable of leading and training the high-quality soldiers recruited to serve.

Creating a professional, volunteer Army meant applying all these changes—in recruiting, retention, personnel, equipment, doctrine, training, and leader development—not only to the active Army but also to the Army National Guard and the Army Reserve. The active Army, Guard, and Reserve became so closely integrated in the period between the end of Vietnam and the First Gulf War that any operational use of Army forces required using substantial parts of the Guard and Reserve. This shift was called the “Total Force” policy.¹⁵

Even though the Army reduced significantly in overall size during this period, it increased the number of its active divisions. Gen. Creighton Abrams accomplished this increase in combat power by including one Army National Guard brigade—called roundout brigades—and selected Army Reserve battalions within active division structures.¹⁶ The Army also shifted the majority of combat service support capacity to the U.S. Army Reserve. By the mid-to-late 1980s, 52 percent of combat forces and 67 percent of combat support and combat service support units in the Army were in the Guard and Reserve.¹⁷ The sequential use of the Guard and Reserve, which had dominated the draft-era Army, changed radically. Henceforth, any



M1A1 Abrams main battle tanks of the 3rd Armored Division move across the desert 15 February 1991 during Operation Desert Storm. A Bradley Fighting Vehicle can be seen in the background. (Photo by Photographer's Mate Chief Petty Officer D. W. Holmes II, U.S. Navy)

operational use of the Army would simultaneously use all components.¹⁸

The proof of the proficiency of America's professional volunteer army came in two operations: The Panama Invasion (December 1989–January 1990) and the First Gulf War (August 1990–February 1991). In Panama, a dictator was deposed and captured, and a democratic government put in place. In Iraq, Kuwait was liberated, and the Iraqi army routed. Both operations were done quickly and decisively. In Panama and Iraq, America and the world watched the result of decades of professionalization. America's professional all-volunteer Army became the gold standard by which all other armies were measured.

The battalion commanders who executed these operations had entered service at about the time it became a professional volunteer force. The generals who led these operations were Vietnam veterans whose wartime experience was a driving force behind the leadership they provided for over a decade and a half. These officers, and the sergeants who were the backbone of the Army, were the product of more than better pay—they were the result

of sustained transformational change of one of the world's largest organizations.¹⁹

In over fifteen years of multiple, interrelated changes and iterative improvements, the Total Army had become more than the sum of its parts. Between the end of the Vietnam War and the First Gulf War, the transformed professional volunteer Total Army was aligned with its social, political, economic, technological, and strategic context. The professional volunteer Army was not just a fix to the problem of social resistance to the draft. Rather, it was the answer to two much broader questions: What did the Nation expect the Army to do, and how could such a force be created within acceptable risk?²⁰

Phase II. The End of the Cold War to the Conclusion of America's Post-9/11 Wars: Changing Contextual Conditions

Two major disruptive changes followed Panama and the Gulf War. First, the Cold War ended with the Soviet Union, America's primary threat, dissolving.

Second, information age technologies seemed to promise a “Revolution in Military Affairs.” Some used both to question the size, composition, and purpose of America’s Army. Later in this period, two potentially dangerous gaps emerged: the first, between the size and composition of the Army and the Nation’s strategic needs; the second, between the Army and the citizens on whose behalf it serves.

The end of the Cold War and information age technology. With the Soviet Union dissolved, some concluded that the era of ideological struggles had

intelligence, convinced some to expand the peace dividend because they believed all future wars would be rapid and decisive operations—faster and on a larger scale than the Gulf War. Ground force size, so the argument went, could be offset by precision air forces, long-range rocket and missile fires, and smaller, high-tech ground units. Some advocates believed information would be so accurate and ubiquitous that the fog of war would be lifted, and battlefield reserves would no longer be required—another reason for reducing ground forces.

“Two potentially dangerous gaps emerged: the first, between the size and composition of the Army and the Nation’s strategic needs; the second, between the Army and the citizens on whose behalf it serves.”

ended, and any potential World War III was a thing of the past, so a peace dividend was in order. In the 1990s, that dividend came in the shape of about a 30 percent cut in Army size and budget—even as the operational tempo (OPTEMPO) of the Army increased significantly. The size of the National Guard and Army Reserve was also reduced, increasing the pace of deployment for the remaining units as well. Sequential and overlapping small-scale contingency operations of the 1990s—Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo, and others, had a

negative effect on retention of active soldiers, but had an even more significant impact on Reserve and National Guard units not accustomed to such use. ... In fiscal year 1986, Reserve components contributed nine hundred thousand man-days of service; by fiscal year 1999 that figure had skyrocketed to 12.5 million man-days.²¹

By the mid-to-late 1990s, senior Army leaders were faced with the effects of high OPTEMPO, especially for Special Forces and among military occupational specialties like military police, engineers, civil affairs, and other specialties that were low density but in very high demand.

In addition, the level of precision demonstrated in the First Gulf War, both in the air and on the ground, plus the increased availability of near-real-time

Technology-inspired academicians, strategists, and leaders—some in uniform—promulgated the belief that war itself had changed. They defined war, and therefore warfighters, very narrowly: conventional; technology-enhanced; shock and awe, rapid, decisive operations. Everything else was “other than war.” And, since the Army existed to fight and win the Nation’s wars, a strain of thinking evolved both among military and civilian strategists that considered “operations other than war” somebody else’s business.

The 1990s was a bifurcated period. On the one hand, the Army shrunk, for many held the belief that a large ground force would never again be necessary. On the other hand, the actual strategic demands of multiple small-scale contingency operations increased the use of the Total Army significantly. The professional volunteer Army that won in Panama and the Gulf War no longer seemed to fit the strategic environment unfolding in the early post-Cold War period. It was too large and too tied to a form of conventional combat that many believed was obsolete—even as it was overused. As Rosa Brooks observed, “We no longer know what kind of military we need, or how to draw sensible lines between civilian and military tasks and roles.”²²

The Army “digitized” in the mid-1990s to early 2000s, and smaller Army units became more lethal. But lost in the zealotry of the time was this: size still mattered because rapid, decisive operations described

only one possible way future war might be fought and waged. A tension developed, therefore, between the desire to retain a professional volunteer Army for the kind of rapid, decisive war many thought was the future and the affordability of a professional force needed to both prepare for that future and serve the Nation's immediate strategic needs.

Costs rose continuously: costs of civilianizing garrison activities, of pay and benefits, of modernizing and improving the technological capacity of equipment, of continual improvements in training—both for live training exercises as well as constructive and virtual reality simulations. The combination of reducing the size of the Army and rising costs often drove senior army and political leaders to make size and composition decisions sometimes based more on affordability than on strategic needs—decisions that exacerbated the already growing problem of overusing an ever-smaller force.

In the absence of the Cold War threat, with the “promises” of technology, and in the face of rising costs, the two-war construct for sizing the Army ultimately was abandoned. It was replaced first by a base force and a contingency force construct, then by a two-major-regional-contingency requirement, and finally a one-and-a-half war model. The Total Army was affected.²³

Even before the attacks of 11 September 2001, the Nation's strategic reserve—the National Guard and U.S. Army Reserve—was becoming a *de facto* operational reserve. In fact, during the more than twenty years of post-9/11 war, the Nation's reserve forces have become excellent operational reserves. In the process, however, the Nation was left with an atrophied strategic mobilization capacity. The Nation's ability to expand its military and industrial base is all but gone—just as the global environment has made both strategically important.

The Guard and Reserve reduced in size at the end of the Cold War like the active force. And while not hollow, they are both suffering from recruiting and retention shortages and challenges like the active Army. More recently, it seems the Army may be intending to cast the Guard and Reserve as both an operational and strategic reserve force—risking overpromising and underdelivering.

Politically, the risks associated with continued reduction of the Total Army were considered low since technology and precision as well as ubiquitous

information could offset size. Precision would also reduce the ammunition required, even as the cost of precision munitions increased. Political leaders also considered the risk of a smaller, more precise Army acceptable because future wars would be rapid and decisive—not prolonged.

But then came the attacks of 11 September 2001. Reality spoke: not all forms of wars would be rapid and decisive. After the initial invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States found itself fighting two prolonged theater wars as well as a third global war against jihadi extremists—all at the same time. The large ground force that would never be needed was needed. Technology mattered a lot in each of these wars, but so did the numbers of ground troops. Information was extensive, but not ubiquitous; ambiguity and uncertainty reemerged as verities on the battlefield as well as in Washington, D.C., as it fought and waged these wars.

The size of the ground force necessary in Afghanistan, Iraq, and globally was offset somewhat by technology and information, but the Total Army never grew large enough to fight two regional and one global war simultaneously. The overused Total Army of the post-Cold War period became the overused Total Army of the post-9/11 period—so much so that Sergeant Major of the Army Michael Grinston recently said, “We have an enormous strain on soldiers. We're busier now than we ever have been.” He called the situation a “huge concern” for himself and other leaders.²⁴

The actual Army strength required to fight and wage three wars simultaneously was masked during the post-9/11 wars by the substantial growth of contractor support. Contractors assumed many security, maintenance, supply, logistics, construction, administrative, and food service functions formerly done by the Army combat service support organizations long since cut from the Total Army force structure.

The result has been that costs soared—not only the ammunition, equipment, maintenance, and supply costs to fight three wars simultaneously but also the costs associated with the wartime civilian structure and the psychological cost of multiple back-to-back combat rotations. On the surface, America's Army remains the global gold standard for a professional force and its OPTEMPO has not prevented it from meeting every mission the Nation assigns to it. Below the surface, however, the Army's foundation may be cracking.



Two gaps? Some of the Army's shrinkage after the Cold War was natural, the normal response after any war. Another part, however, was anything but natural. It resulted from a core false belief: that American technology and proficiency would guarantee that all future wars would be short, rapid, and decisive. Some even predicted that war in the future would be conducted below the threshold of conventional war, in what are called "gray zones"—which, again, would require only Special Forces and a small Army.²⁵

The Army's size bumped up a bit during America's three post-9/11 wars but not enough to offset the requirement of fighting three wars simultaneously. Furthermore, during the 9/11 wars, Army modernization virtually stopped. As was the case in Vietnam, the primary focus was on immediate fighting requirements. Equipment necessary to fight in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the global war against jihadi extremists improved significantly, as did many intelligence and command-and-control capabilities. Longer-term strategic needs took a back seat.

Adding to the strain of an already stretched force is a pace of operations that has not slowed since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq. Well

Spc. Semaj Girtmon (*left*) and Spc. Jaycob Plasek, assigned to Company C, 1st Battalion, 9th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division, supporting the 4th Infantry Division, load an M249 belt-fed light machine gun during a live-fire exercise on a range at Bemowo Piskie Training Area, Poland, 5 July 2023. Thousands of soldiers have deployed from the United States to reinforce Europe either as part of strengthening NATO's defense or assisting the Ukraine military, straining the already stretched U.S. forces. (Photo by Sgt. Alex Soliday, U.S. Army)

over ten thousand soldiers, for example, have deployed from the continental United States to reinforce Europe either as part of strengthening NATO's defense or assisting the Ukraine military. The result is a gap between an overused, too-small Total Army and current U.S. strategic requirements.

A second gap is also emerging between America's Army and the society on whose behalf it fights. It is too early to say definitively, but the length of the three post-9/11 wars, the repetitive overuse of soldiers and leaders, and the ambiguity associated with the conduct and ending of the post-9/11 wars may be factors affecting American citizens' propensity to serve. Wars are fought for political aims, and the sacrifices of those fighting and of their families are seen as "worth it" when they result in achieving the identified aims. On

the one hand, the United States has not been attacked since 9/11, though military, intelligence, and police forces have thwarted several attempts. On the other hand, al-Qaida has been reduced but not destroyed; the Islamic State, though limited, still prowls; Afghanistan has returned to Taliban control; and Iraq is hardly the democratic ally in the Global War on Terrorism as originally intended. The result is that the trust between echelons within the Army that was evident following the Panama and Gulf Wars is not fully present now. Further, trust between the military and its political leaders is also weakening, as is the trust between the American people and its Army.

“Since the 1990s, the propensity [for military service] of young Americans has steadily declined.”²⁶ Generational attitudes, and the culture wars going on throughout the United States, are very likely affecting not only decisions made by today’s youth but also the advice given to them by those who influence such decisions.

Vocal and repeated accusations of the Army either being too woke or too brutish—especially by high-profile media personalities and journalists as well as by senior political leaders or retired senior military leaders—matter. Even more, political campaigns on both sides of the aisle organizing “soldiers for ____” or “veterans for ____” bring the Army into partisan politics and suggest that soldiers are just one more political action group. America’s culture wars also manifest among retired senior military officers. Lining up generals and admirals on stage as props to demonstrate military support for one candidate over another creates an impression that there are “Democratic” generals and admirals and “Republican” general and admirals, not senior officers who swear allegiance to the U.S. Constitution.

Overall, American citizens are still very proud of their Army and respectful of it, as are America’s civilian leaders, but both groups are growingly disconnected. Kori Shake and Jim Mattis discuss this disconnection in their 2016 book *Warriors & Citizens: American Views of Our Military*.²⁷ While they conclude that the relationship between America’s military and its civilian society is fundamentally strong, they identify an unhealthy disparity between those who fight and those on whose behalf fighting is done.²⁸

Over time, these trends could create too large of a separation between America and America’s Army, which

would have strategic consequences. In fact, *Warriors & Citizens* says at one point that public ignorance about the military is already problematic. It encourages “politicians to consider their strategic choices hemmed in by public opposition and to shift responsibility for winning policy arguments onto the military; [public ignorance] impedes sustained support for the war effort; permits the imposition of social policies that erode battlefield lethality; fosters a sense of victimization of veterans that skews defense spending toward pay and benefits; and distances veterans from our broader society.”²⁹

As the volunteer force celebrates its fiftieth year, two sets of questions come to the fore. First, to what degree are the converging social, political, economic, and strategic conditions that spawned America’s volunteer Army following the Vietnam War now diverging? And if they are, is this divergence a problem? Second, to what degree does America’s professional volunteer Army fit the Nation’s strategic requirements?

An initial reading of *Warriors & Citizens* might suggest that, while there are some worrisome trends, the relationship between the Army and current social, political, economic, technological, and strategic conditions is not yet breaking. All should be cautious of such a reading, however, for the book was published in 2016, meaning its research and writing took place before 2015—before the pandemic, the embarrassing withdrawal from Afghanistan, the 6 January attack on Congress, the widening divisiveness in public discourse, the enduring recruiting crisis, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, and China’s more assertive military stance. A more current source of information on this topic is Peter Feaver’s *Thanks for Your Service: The Causes and Consequences of Public Confidence in the U.S. Military*.³⁰ His analysis may provide additional insight. Questioning the viability of the relationship between America’s Army and its contextual conditions could not come at a more important time.

Phase III. A Complex and Unstable Multipolar, Great Power Strategic Environment: Does America’s Total Army Still Fit?

The myth of war as a rapid, decisive operation was exploded first by the post-9/11 wars and now by the Ukraine War. Additionally, a Chinese invasion of

Taiwan—should such an invasion occur—is unlikely to be rapid and decisive and may even spread to engulf the Indo-Pacific region. The possibility of war in all its forms is rising. Present before our eyes is the potential for a prolonged, conventional war in Europe and the potential for another in the Indo-Pacific—just the kind of wars thought in the 1990s to be a thing of the past. Furthermore, other threats remain: jihadi extremists; the ever-present nuclear-armed, rogue North Korea; a weakened Russia threatening the use of nuclear weapons as well as destabilizing Europe and the Middle East; China’s rise in Asia and beyond; and Iran’s partnerships with Russia and China, destabi-

lizing operations throughout the Middle East, quest for nuclear arms, and emerging relationship with Saudi Arabia. The emerging global security environment raises the question of the relationship between America’s Total Army and the Nation’s strategic requirements. The base questions for the Army’s senior leaders and the Nation are similar to those of the 1970s: What kind of Total Army, to include its industrial and materiel base, does America need in our actual strategic environment? And, how can the U.S. create this Army within affordable risk?

America’s senior political and military leaders must ask themselves fundamental questions, just as their predecessors did at the end of the Vietnam War. This discussion must extend to the Nation’s political leaders in the executive and legislative branches. Unlike the period in which the professional volunteer Army was created, however, the current cultural milieu as well as the lack of experience and understanding of the military among political leaders (only 34 percent of senators and 18 percent of representatives have served in the military) will hinder making the appropriate

adaptive decisions necessary to align the Total Army with America and the strategic environment.³¹

These challenges, however, cannot divert leaders from addressing at least these critical issues:

- The Nation has never been able to afford the size of Army, to include its industrial and materiel base, that strategic requirements demand. So what size is associated with acceptable risk based upon the actual strategic requirements of today’s global environment and the realities of fighting and waging multiple kinds of wars? The size of America’s Total Army cannot be based upon the world as we would like it to be or the war we

“The current cultural milieu as well as the lack of experience and understanding of the military among political leaders (only 34 percent of senators and 18 percent of representatives have served in the military) will hinder making the appropriate adaptive decisions necessary to align the Total Army with America and the strategic environment.”

would like to fight. Today’s strategic environment may require better expansibility than the Army currently has. Expansibility, therefore, should be part of the discussion of right-sizing the Total Army to today’s world. Part of any discussion should also include an analysis of a newly conceived version of conscription. In the end, senior leaders may reject the idea, but to do so preemptively would be intellectually self-limiting.

- The Army’s people programs are not just about pay and benefits. They’re about readiness of individuals, leaders, units, and families. Too few Americans remember the sad state of Army readiness at the start of World War II, the beginning of the Korean War, or the hollow Army of the 1970s. Fortunately, those nadir years don’t describe today’s Total Army, but the future may begin to resemble the past unless substantial changes occur in recruitment, training time (which differs from deployment time), and quality of life issues.
- Joining the Army has never been just about the pay or benefits. They are important, but more important

is serving the Nation, being part of something greater than oneself, doing one's part as a citizen, and embracing a willingness to sacrifice in defense of our Nation. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said in 2010, however, "For a growing number of Americans, service in the military, no matter how laudable, has become something for other people to do."³² How can senior political and military leaders increase the "propensity to serve" among recruit-aged citizens and their influencers? How can they expand the pool of young citizens who are qualified for service? The answers to these questions require extended civil-military cooperation, especially with congressional leaders. In the end, raising and sustaining America's Total Army is a congressional responsibility.³³ To be sure, the Department of the Army has a lot of self-reflection and work to do with respect to recruiting and retention as well as how insulated the Army has become. Equally sure is that Congress must act (a) to address the national problems that have reduced the pool of available recruits to less than 25 percent of American youth, (b) to help reduce the effects of culture wars and partisan political action on the Army, (c) to show that citizenship and service to the Nation are important values in a democracy, and (d) to place compensation at a level that soldiers no longer need food stamps or other programs to augment their salary.

- Adaptation to available technology, to strategic requirements, and to allocated funding has always meant that the Total Army's end strength and force structure is dynamic. So, how can the Total Army and the industrial and materiel base be gradually restructured to provide the Nation with the Army it needs? Twenty years of war has delayed serious modernization within the Army. Some plans exist, and some monies have been made available, but major improvements in the industrial base, the acquisition system, and the

Army's infrastructure remain more fallow than cultivated fields.

- The wars the Army will fight will not be in the continental United States. The Russia-Ukraine war has made evident that deploying troops, weapons, equipment, ammunition, and supplies requires more sea and airlift than is currently available. Strategic flexibility and responsiveness—important in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere—require a modern support base and secure supply chain. The right balance of forward deployed units and those stationed within the United States, upgrading and securing the materiel base, providing adequate transportation means, and suitable deployment mechanisms, therefore, must be part of any discussion.

Facing these and other issues head-on will begin to produce a Total Army that is once again aligned with the social, political, economic, technological, and strategic conditions of the current historical period. No doubt many of the capabilities, systems, units, and programs of today's Army can, and should, be continued or modified. Equally without doubt, however, is that the contextual conditions from which the professional volunteer Army emerged have changed drastically. The Army must adapt—in size and composition. Further, the adaptation must realign the relationship between America's Army and the society on whose behalf it fights.

Today's senior Army leaders are the product of twenty years at war. Like their post-Vietnam predecessors, they are responsible for the profession. They must initiate a set of conversations—within the Total Army, then among senior leaders in the executive and legislative branches—and take the action necessary to assure that the future of America's professional volunteer force is ready to respond as well as it has for the past fifty years. This will be difficult and challenging, especially given the acrimony that surrounds any serious discussions today, but it must be done for the sake of the Nation. ■

Notes

1. Bernard Rostker, *I Want You! The Evolution of the All-Volunteer Force* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006).

2. Drew DeSilver, "New Congress Will Have a Few More Veterans, but Their Share of Lawmakers Is Still Near a Record Low," Pew Research Center, 7 December 2022, accessed 30 June 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/>

[short-reads/2022/12/07/new-congress-will-have-a-few-more-veterans-but-their-share-of-lawmakers-is-still-near-a-record-low/](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/07/new-congress-will-have-a-few-more-veterans-but-their-share-of-lawmakers-is-still-near-a-record-low/).

3. Gen. Dennis J. Reimer (retired, former chief of staff of the Army), email with authors, 30 May 2023.

4. U.S. Army War College, *Study on Military Professionalism* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 30 June 1970),

53–54, accessed 30 June 2023, <https://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p4013coll11/id/1644>.

5. Ibid., 13.

6. For an account of this period of transformation, see James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Officers Born of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1995).

7. John L. Romjue, *From Active Defense to AirLand Battle: The Development of Army Doctrine, 1973–1982* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command [TRADOC], 1984).

8. Ibid.

9. In the 1970s, the authors were company grade officers who served together first in the 82nd Airborne Division, then in the newly formed 2nd Ranger Battalion. Both were not just observers of the Army's training transformation but also early implementors of it.

10. Chief of Staff Gen. Creighton Abrams created the modern Ranger battalions as much to demonstrate to the Army how this new training methodology could work as to provide the Army with a new operational capability.

11. The performance-oriented training methodology adopted in the 1970 was first capture in a series of TRADOC pamphlets, then in Field Manual 25-100, *Training the Force* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, October 1988).

12. At the time, this was called "decentralized command," now it's "mission command."

13. Robert H. Scales, *Certain Victory: The US Army in the Gulf War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, 1994), 27.

14. Ibid., 28.

15. Ellen M. Pint et al., *Review of Army Total Force Policy Implementation* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017).

16. For an excellent summary of these two decisions, see Conrad Crane's "Post-Vietnam Drawdown: The Myth of the Abrams Doctrine," in *Drawdown: The American Way of Postwar*, ed. Jason W. Warren (New York: New York University Press, 2016), chap. 10, Kindle.

17. Scales, *Certain Victory*, 18.

18. The roundout concept brought all components closer together. Ultimately, it increased professionalism, improved readiness, and allowed the Army to retain necessary force structure. But it was not without problems. Active, Guard, and Reserve personnel policies, funding methodologies, training standards, and readiness procedures all had to be rationalized. This rationalization took much senior leader effort and a lot of time. One of the main challenges for the Total Army, however, came during the First Gulf War. After the 48th, 155th, and 256th National Guard combat brigades received their active-duty notification for Operation Desert Storm, it took them much longer to get ready than expected. To further complicate Army National Guard deployment, some Guard leaders thought that the active component placed additional training requirements on them to meet deployment certification, which only one of the three brigades managed to reach. This controversy resulted in an extensive series of

extremely sensitive discussions among the senior leaders of each component and Congress. In the end, the Total Army became even more closely knitted together, however. Scars formed within the Army's components, but the fruit of this knitting was born out in America's post-9/11 wars where U.S. Army Guard and Reserve units deployed repetitively and successfully.

19. Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers*.

20. These questions developed from an email exchange between Col. (Ret.) Len Fullenkamp and the authors, 3 June 2023.

21. Crane, "Post-Vietnam Drawdown," in Warren, *Drawdown*, loc. 246, Kindle.

22. Rosa Brooks, "Civil-Military Paradoxes," in *Warriors & Citizens: American Views of Our Military*, ed. Kori Shake and Jim Mattis (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2016), 22.

23. The military shifted from a threat-based model to determine the appropriate size of the force to a capability-based model. The latter provided increased flexibility but also began to mask increasing levels of risk inherent in the force.

24. James Clark, "Soldiers under 'Enormous Strain' Warns Army's Top Enlisted Leader," *Army Times* (website), 12 May 2023, accessed 30 June 2023, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2023/05/12/soldiers-under-enormous-strain-warns-armys-top-enlisted-leader/>.

25. For a summary of this false belief and its strategic consequences, see James M. Dubik, *America's Global Competition, The Gray Zone in Context* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, February 2018), accessed 30 June 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/report/americas-global-competitions-gray-zone-context>; James M. Dubik, *The Future of War and America's Strategic Capacity* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, November 2021), accessed 30 June 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/report/future-war-and-america's-strategic-capacity>.

26. Ulysses J. Brown and Dharam S. Rana, "Generalized Exchange and Propensity for Military Service: The Moderating Effect of Prior Military Exposure," *Journal of Applied Statistics* 32, no. 3 (2005): 259–70, accessed 30 June 2023, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02664760500054590>.

27. Shake and Mattis, *Warriors & Citizens*.

28. Ibid. Several essays in *Warriors & Citizens* address this problem: Rosa Brooks's "Civil-Military Paradoxes," 21–68; Mackubin Thomas Owens, "Is Civilian Control Over the Military Still and Issue?," 69–96; and Shake and Mattis's conclusion, "Ensuring a Civil-Military Connection," 287–326.

29. Shake and Mattis, *Warriors & Citizens*, 19–20; see, especially, Brooks, "Civil-Military Paradoxes," in Shake and Mattis, *Warriors & Citizens*, 39–49.

30. Peter D. Feaver, *Thanks for Your Service: The Causes and Consequences of Public Confidence in the U.S. Military* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

31. DeSilver, "New Congress Will Have a Few More Veterans."

32. Robert Gates, quoted in Brooks, "Civil-Military Paradoxes," in Shake and Mattis, *Warriors & Citizens*, 23.

33. U.S. Const., art. I, § 8, cl. 12.