



Recruits recite the Oath of Enlistment 27 March 2022 in Miami. (Photo by Lara Poirrier, U.S. Army)

Lack of Will

How the All-Volunteer Force Conditioned the American Public

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Woe to the government, which, relying on half-hearted politics and a shackled military policy, meets a foe who, like the untamed element, knows no law other than his own power!

—Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*

Fiscal year (FY) 2022 marked the U.S. Army's worst recruiting year since the inception of the all-volunteer force (AVF) in 1973.¹ The Army missed its target of sixty thousand recruits by nearly

fifteen thousand, leading to a reduction in end strength of twenty-one thousand over the previous year and prompting Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth to suggest the need for Reservists or National Guard members to fill active-duty billets.² This was despite the Army spending nearly 38 percent of its FY22 budget—roughly \$66 billion—on personnel.³ It also comes only three years after the creation of the Office of the Chief Army Enterprise Marketing, a centralized office charged with coordinating the Army's national marketing and advertising strategy to support the recruiting requirements of an AVF.⁴ Since then, the Army has continued to invest heavily in recruiting, retention, and marketing, with an FY24 budget request that includes approximately \$390 million for marketing and advertising and \$290 million for recruiting, including the largest bonus ever offered to initial recruits—\$50,000.⁵ While the AVF's high cost is well documented and oft-debated, what is less discussed is what this price tag purchases and what effect it has on the Nation's ability to wage war.

Studying the AVF in this context helps determine whether this method of manning an Army—inducement by bounty—is suitable for delivering a combat-credible force to backstop the *National Defense Strategy*. Both the *National Defense Strategy* and *National Military Strategy* make clear, should integrated deterrence fail, the U.S. military must be able to fight and win against a peer adversary.⁶ In other words, the Army must be able to prevail in large-scale combat. As FY22 demonstrates, if the relatively lucrative incentives tied to volunteerism are unable to meet defense requirements during peace, will they suffice in war? And not just any war, but a high-intensity, protracted fight with a technologically capable and potentially larger foe. If not, what does this indicate about the relationship between the military and society, and what does it mean for the Nation's ability to prosecute large wars?

The answers to these questions reveal that despite its investment in personnel, fifty years of the AVF has conditioned much of the American public to eschew military service while simultaneously enabling wars of want that have, in turn, only reinforced public skepticism about military service. In essence, the all-volunteer manning construct purchased a small but professional force in exchange for public acquiescence to its use abroad. Over time this began to sever society's relationship with its military, and it had a significant

impact on determining when and to what extent the Nation can wage war. By abandoning mandatory service, the AVF dismantled the executive branch's ability to directly tap the Nation's populace—a critical resource, or means, for war—under the assumption that a combination of incentives and national will, or ethos, would draw enough recruits to fill the ranks when needed. However, by conditioning the American public into believing that its military did not need it, and that wars are often fought under dubious pretense in pursuit of peripheral interests, the AVF stifled the very will needed to tap back into the means it required. This effectively eliminated the American populace from the decision calculus around when to go to war and its contribution to war prosecution.

As history, strategic theory, and contemporary events all show, big wars are a test of total means and strength of will.⁷ The AVF's principal shortcoming, its tendency to separate the populace from the military, makes it a largely unsuitable and historically unproven vehicle for massing the strength of will necessary to prosecute large wars. While it may prove tenable for manning an Army tasked with conducting protracted limited contingency operations such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq or for the ever-elusive short and decisive war, its propensity to sideline the populace means it lacks the depth necessary for large-scale, expeditionary combat against a peer.⁸ The policymakers charged with developing the AVF recognized this shortcoming, and two early safeguards built in and around it were designed to maintain the connective tissue between society and its military to prevent the national apathy that could result from its misuse abroad: the Abrams and Weinberger Doctrines. As such, these doctrines provide a framework for assessing how the AVF's employment can affect the public's perception of it and the public's relationship with it. Both doctrines recognized the centrality of popular will, or what Carl von Clausewitz termed “primordial violence, hatred, and enmity,” in determining the scope and character of conflict, and each recognized the risk

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that an AVF might become divorced from it.⁹ Because of this, they sought to keep warfighting a “national” affair by ensuring buy-in at home and preventing the AVF from being wantonly dispatched abroad. Using these doctrines to examine how the AVF was employed during both Operation Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom makes it possible to understand how these very different wars conditioned the public to avoid military service.

Creighton Abrams and the All-Volunteer Cold War Army

Born out of popular discontent with the Vietnam War, Congress approved a bill that ended the draft and transitioned the military to an AVF in September 1971.¹⁰ This decision was not without debate, and only after invoking cloture was a slight majority able to stymie an attempted filibuster and pass the contested legislation.¹¹ Nor was it unanimously approved by President Richard Nixon’s inner circle. Gen. Lewis Hershey, the advisor to the president on manpower mobilization, pled with him to veto the initiative, stating, “The presumption that the national security can be maintained by armed forces provided by added pay incentives is based on hopes that have not been sustained by the history of the United States ... The message gives encouragement to those who desire to be relieved from obligations of military service.”¹² Despite these objections, Nixon signed the bill, and Public Law 92-129 went into effect on 28 September 1971.¹³ After an extension clause enabled transition, the program that yielded an uninterrupted supply of personnel for the Cold War military since 1948 officially ended on 1 July 1973.

While significant, the transition to an AVF at the close of the Vietnam War was more of the norm than an exception. Throughout most of its history, America has relied on a volunteer force to man its peacetime military, swelling the ranks through conscription for war and downsizing shortly thereafter.¹⁴ However, much like today, the United States did not emerge from Vietnam as the sole superpower in a peaceful world. Instead, the threat posed by the Soviet Union dominated force development and design. Internalizing lessons from Vietnam, those charged with developing an AVF that could counter a peer threat recognized the importance of national will in harnessing the support required for a big fight while also acknowledging its

perceived ability to keep the Nation out of unnecessary entanglements. Under the doctrine that bears his name, Gen. Creighton Abrams, then chief of staff of the Army, devised one such mechanism to maintain the vital relationship between America and its Army.

At its core, the Abrams Doctrine sought to keep society vested in its Army by filling the void left by the draft with the Reserve and National Guard.¹⁵ It placed critical supporting units and enablers—engineers, transportation, maintenance, supply, and others—in the Reserve so that combat units could not deploy en masse without them. This inextricably linked the Reserve and Active Components in a mutually dependent relationship; a relationship then Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, and later James Schlesinger, would further refine into the Total Force Concept.¹⁶ Abrams meant the doctrine to correct President Lyndon Johnson’s contentious decision to fight the Vietnam War without mobilizing the National Guard or Reserve. Johnson refused to call up the Reserve Component in a desperate attempt to keep the affair in Southeast Asia from interfering with his Great Society efforts at home.¹⁷ Abrams wanted to correct this by making it increasingly difficult for future presidents to commit forces abroad without tapping into citizen-soldiers at home. “They’re not taking us to war again without calling up the Reserves,” he declared.¹⁸ The intended effect was twofold.

First, Abrams aimed to use the mobilization time required for Reserve deployments to give the National Command Authority (NCA) the space necessary to assess the character of the conflict they were about to undertake and to garner the popular support required to successfully prosecute it.¹⁹ In this regard, it became a de facto check on the president’s ability to deploy the volunteer force prematurely without prudent assessment or adequate national will. Second, it endeavored to maintain the representative quality of a conscript force by tying the AVF to the populace through National Guard and Reserve units woven throughout towns and cities across the country.²⁰ Gen. John Vessey, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recalled Abrams’s aversion to building an insular volunteer force: “Let’s not build an Army off here in the corner someplace. The armed forces are an expression of the nation. If you take them out of the national context, you are likely to screw them up.”²¹ This latter intention, making the



AVF representative of the American people, made the Abrams Doctrine an important component of the AVF. By reaching out and touching a vast cross-section of the Nation anytime the Army marched off to war, the doctrine sought to ensure the American public maintained literal skin in the game. Local economies, families, and every congressional district would have a very real interest in the goings-on of the American military abroad. In this capacity, the doctrine recognized the relationship between strength of will and national sacrifice, using willingness for the latter to measure the former. On the one hand, public support would indicate the strength of will necessary to prevail in a large fight or, on the other, public outcry would prevent the Nation from entering conflicts it lacked the will to win. While the doctrine ultimately failed, it tried to bridge the ever-widening gap between America and its volunteer military, ensuring the public understood that war meant sacrifice and that their willingness to do so would directly influence when and where the Nation went to war.

By 1989, on the eve of its first real test, roughly 89 percent of the Army's maintenance companies, 90

Gen. Creighton Williams Abrams Jr. (*right*), commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, attaches a campaign streamer to a unit flag during a 3 January 1970 ceremony in Vietnam. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

percent of its supply companies, and 67 percent of its combat engineer and transportation units were in the Reserve Component.²² In the largest mobilization since the Korean War, over sixty-two thousand National Guard members and over thirty-five thousand Reservists were called to active duty to help eject Iraq's military from Kuwait.²³ The Abrams Doctrine and the Total Force Concept had effectively transitioned the Reserve Component from a strategic to an operational reserve, delivering on Abrams's promise to ensure the Nation never again went to war without them. However, between its inception in 1974 and Operation Desert Storm in 1991, another doctrine emerged that sought to inject prudence into national decision-making to preserve public trust and prevent misuse of the AVF. Although both doctrines would appear to pass this first test in Iraq with flying colors, their stunning



success had unintended consequences for subsequent decisions about when to use force abroad and the public's perception of their role in it.

The Weinberger Doctrine and the First Gulf War

When he entered office as secretary of defense in 1981, Caspar Weinberger faced recruiting and retention challenges similar to those staring down the Army today and he worried the AVF was not ready for a showdown with the Soviet Union.²⁴ Initial enlistments and reenlistments were down as was the quality of recruits, with only 60 percent of applicants possessing a high school diploma.²⁵ A strong advocate of President Ronald Reagan's initiative to significantly increase defense spending, Weinberger channeled substantial funds toward improving compensation and benefits to maintain the relative size of the AVF while improving its quality.²⁶ Between 1981 and 1987 defense spending increased by roughly a third, from \$686.6 billion to \$959.1 billion (in 2022 dollars), while the number of active duty service members only increased by 91,657.²⁷ This investment in the quality of personnel was accompanied by significant

Col. Bruce Fister (*right*), commander of the 435th Tactical Air Wing, bids farewell to Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger after his visit on 28 March 1986 to Rhein-Main Air Base, West Germany. (Photo courtesy of the National Archives)

investment in modernization with several new weapons, such as the F-117 Stealth Fighter, the M1 Abrams Tank, and the Patriot Missile Defense System, making their debut. Such investments in modernization and professionalization would rightly give most decision-makers pause about when and where to commit such an expensive force abroad. Weinberger was no different, and with the lessons of Vietnam still fresh, he searched for a framework to help the NCA navigate the minefield of smoldering, potential Cold War conflicts.

A year after a car bomb killed 266 Marines in Beirut, Weinberger outlined his six tests for the commitment of U.S. forces in a 28 November 1984 speech to the National Press Club. Laying out the tenets of the Weinberger Doctrine, he attempted to curb the wanton use of force by arguing the following criteria should be met before sending the AVF to war:

First, the United States should not commit forces to combat overseas unless the particular engagement is deemed vital to our national interest or that of our allies.

Second, if we decide it is necessary to put combat troops into a given situation, we should do so wholeheartedly, and with the clear intention of winning. If we are unwilling to commit the forces or resources necessary to achieve our objectives, we should not commit them at all.

Third, if we do decide to commit forces to combat overseas, we should have clearly defined political and military objectives.

Fourth, the relationship between our objectives and the forces we have committed—their size, composition, and disposition—must be continually reassessed and adjusted if necessary.

Fifth, before the U.S. commits combat forces abroad there must be some reasonable assurance we will have the support of the American people and their elected representatives in Congress.

Sixth, finally, the commitment of U.S. forces to combat should be the last resort.²⁸

Although not official policy, the doctrine sheds light on the perspective of the senior appointed official leading the Department of Defense for over six years, and it had a substantial impact on defense policy and those charged with crafting it for nearly a decade after its introduction.²⁹

Weinberger's first, second, and fifth tests are paramount to understanding the risks inherent in an AVF, the importance of national will, and the fragile ties between the two. The first test implicitly acknowledges the ease with which the NCA could commit its volunteer force to wars of want without evoking a backlash at home. This was a continual challenge for



Young men registering for military conscription on 5 June 1917 in New York City. (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Weinberger, who frequently found himself battling the National Security Council's desire for "ever more wild adventures for our troops. The NSC staff's eagerness to get into a fight somewhere—anywhere—coupled with their apparent lack of concern for the safety of our troops [was appalling]."³⁰ As such, the test meant to prevent an "imperial president" from involving the Nation in conflicts over anything but vital interests, for, if it did, Weinberger reasoned this would degrade willingness to serve to levels similar to those observed during the Vietnam War.³¹ As historian Andrew Bacevich noted, "Vietnam demolished the notion of military obligation and brought the tradition of the citizen-soldier to the verge of extinction. And it persuaded many that war itself—especially as waged by obtuse American generals doing the bidding of mendacious civilian officials—had become an exercise in futility."³² Further involvement in conflicts over peripheral or unclear national interests would only erode what little service ethos the populace had left.

Weinberger's second and fifth tests both relate to the importance of national will. The second test, "no half-measures," pays homage to Clausewitz's maxim that war is a test of the total means *and* strength of

will. Here, Weinberger emphasizes that if the Nation decides to commit troops to combat, it should be prepared to mobilize all available resources, including the populace and the economy, if necessary. In other words, where the troops go, the Nation follows. In this regard, its similarities with the Abrams Doctrine become more evident. Combat at large should not be considered an economy-of-force operation, as victory often depends on the government's ability to muster the necessary resources and the population's willingness to support

exploring that unique development, it is important to assess how the Weinberger Doctrine fared during the Persian Gulf War.

Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 provided the first opportunity to see the Abrams and Weinberger Doctrines in action. With the Soviet Union mired in internal disputes and teetering toward dissolution, the George H. W. Bush administration could shift its focus from Europe to the Middle East, where maintaining stability and access to oil were

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this mobilization through the sacrifices accompanying it. Anything less risks ceding the strategic advantage to an enemy with greater will from the outset.

Weinberger's fifth test directly recognizes the importance of national will and popular support in decisions concerning combat abroad. Like the Abrams Doctrine, which sought to indirectly leverage popular buy-in by drawing on National Guard and Reserve units across congressional districts, the Weinberger Doctrine makes an explicit plea to assess this support from the start and gauge changes to it throughout the fight. Joining battle without this support is akin to neutralizing or ignoring the component of Clausewitz's renowned trinity he considered most revolutionary in his day: the people.³³ While an initial assessment of popular support is critical to deciding whether to start or join a conflict, it also rests on the Nation's leaders to sustain this support throughout the war. In World War II this support was tangible, as leaders urged Americans to support the war in a variety of ways, including by buying bonds, planting a victory garden, carpooling, and contributing to scrap metal drives. In more recent conflicts, such as Operation Desert Storm, civilian sacrifice evolved to symbolism as Americans displayed yellow ribbons and other patriotic regalia in a show of moral support for the troops. Later, after the 11 September 2001 attacks, this imperative was inverted, and Americans were encouraged to behave as though there was no war at all. However, before

considered vital national interests. Passing the first of Weinberger's tests, Operation Desert Storm made clear this would be no half-measure as an impressive coalition of over forty nations and nearly five hundred thousand U.S. troops assembled in the region.³⁴ To Weinberger's fifth test, roughly 57 percent of the American public supported using the military to remove Saddam's army from Kuwait, with 70 percent having full confidence in victory.³⁵ Although not without debate, Congress too got on board, narrowly passing Public Law 102-1 authorizing the use of force to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation under the auspices of United Nations Resolution 678.³⁶ Guided by four relatively clear, albeit limited, objectives outlined in National Security Directive 54, *Responding to Iraqi Aggression in the Gulf*, it can reasonably be assessed to have passed Weinberger's third test.³⁷ Having garnered broad international and domestic support, U.S. forces joined over three hundred thousand members of the multinational coalition and initiated offensive operations on 17 January 1991.³⁸ Meeting nearly all of Weinberger's prerequisites, it was time to see whether the AVF would deliver in combat.

On the surface, Operation Desert Storm was a stunning success and complete validation of the AVF. Not only did it justify the investments in personnel and weaponry of the 1980s, but it also demonstrated the AVF's qualitative edge and esprit de corps, routing the

Iraqi army in one hundred hours of ground combat. More impressive than its speed was the relative efficiency of this high-tech war, with only 147 U.S. service members killed in action to an estimated twenty-five thousand Iraqis.³⁹ The message was clear: a well-equipped, volunteer force could deliver on national security objectives when those objectives were appropriately scoped and overwhelming force was applied. The American public appreciated this as well, with approval for the use of force against Iraq rising to 80 percent once the coalition offensive was underway, and an additional 90 percent believing U.S. forces were “doing a good job.”⁴⁰ After the war, American confidence in the military as an institution soared to an impressive 89 percent.⁴¹ A collective celebration ensued as the military, its civilian leaders, and the public enjoyed a National Victory Day parade on 8 June 1991 and a traditional ticker tape parade through New York City two days later.⁴²

While an undeniable sense of pride washed over the Nation that summer, it is hard to help but consider the nuanced differences between what each group was celebrating. The military had finally kicked the “Vietnam syndrome” and restored its reputation. The Bush administration had worked hard to align the diplomatic, political, and military instruments of national power to achieve its objectives while avoiding the overreach that often accompanies initial success in war.⁴³ The public, asked only to symbolically support the troops, cheered its volunteer force for demonstrating American military prowess and delivering justice where due. All three groups likely breathed a collective sigh of relief in the confirmation that an AVF, under the right circumstances, could win. Like the cause for celebration, the effect of this realization varied between the groups. For the military, it vindicated the significant force development initiatives and structural reforms that went into the post-Vietnam military. For the political leadership, it increased confidence in the military instrument of power and lowered inhibitions for its use abroad. Finally, for the public, it reinforced the notion that service as choice is an effective model, and reduced the likelihood they would ever be pressed into it. If, as Bacevich argues, the Vietnam War “demolished the notion of military obligation,” then the Persian Gulf War put the first nail in its coffin by demonstrating to the American public that the Nation could fight and win its wars without them.⁴⁴ In many regards,

Operation Desert Storm was the perfect storm, and the AVF emerged from it superficially unscathed because it was employed in accordance with the strict criteria established by the Weinberger Doctrine. However, just over a decade later the AVF would again face Saddam’s army, this time without passing Weinberger’s tests, and this time the result would be much different.

At the Mall: Operation Iraqi Freedom

In 2003, the Nation would once again forgo conscription in favor of calling on the AVF to do its bidding. But aside from sharing this unique feature, the Iraq War of 2003 differed in almost every conceivable way from the Iraq War of 1991. Although it met some of Weinberger’s tests, it failed others, and it directly turned one on its head. This, coupled with the failure of the Abrams Doctrine and the administration’s ability to shield the populace from the war through programs like Stop Loss, undermined society’s trust in the military and had a disastrous effect on how it viewed military service. The resultant conditioning only reinforced the professionalization of America’s warrior class and increased the public’s general aversion to service.

When examining the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the George W. Bush administration clearly saw little value in the Weinberger Doctrine, refusing to be constrained by tests designed to impede the rush to war. Unlike 1991, Iraq had not grievously violated an international norm prior to the U.S. invasion; instead, the administration justified the campaign as a preemptive act to thwart Saddam Hussein from acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Although based on faulty intelligence, this appeared to be in the Nation’s vital interest, and in the year prior to the invasion, a vast majority of the American public, a staggering 73 percent, supported using force to remove Saddam from power.⁴⁵ While support fell once events in Iraq began to unravel, at the outset, both Congress and the American people were behind the endeavor. Having initially passed Weinberger’s first and fifth tests, the Bush administration was unable to garner United Nations support and the campaign ultimately failed the doctrine’s sixth test as war with Iraq in 2003 was by no means a last resort. It also failed the third test as the initial reason for removing Saddam—his pursuit of WMD—quickly gave way to much more amorphous objectives regarding the

promotion of democracy once WMD were nowhere to be found.⁴⁶ This shift in pretense seriously damaged public trust; a public that recognized the vital importance of protecting the Nation from attack by WMD but did not place equal import on Iraq's form of governance. The populace felt betrayed and their sentiment showed as much: by 2007, 67 percent said the war was not going well; and a year later, 54 percent believed the U.S. made the wrong decision to use military force in Iraq, a 38 percent increase in disapproval from 2002.⁴⁷ Much of this displeasure likely stemmed from being sold a war the administration claimed would require few resources and little effort, a complete dismissal of Weinberger's second test—"no half measures"—and one that deserves a closer look.

Instead of responsibly mobilizing the Nation for war, the Bush administration made clear that Iraq would be a limited war and senior officials promised it would cost little in the way of blood or treasure. This led to constant back-and-forth negotiations on troop levels between the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), led by Donald Rumsfeld, and the operational planners at U.S. Central Command, who had the support of the service chiefs. In his initial guidance, Rumsfeld advocated a "running-start plan" that called for a paltry commitment of eighteen thousand troops with follow-on forces only deploying when necessary.⁴⁸ Recognizing the infeasibility of this course of action, U.S. Central Command planners eventually convinced Rumsfeld to accept a different plan and a larger, but still modest, contingent of 222,500 troops—roughly a third of the number used in Operation Desert Storm.⁴⁹ This did not sit well with Gen. Eric Shinseki, then chief of staff of the Army, who remarked that the OSD had "constipated the hell out of the process" and greatly stressed the Reserve Component by introducing an unnecessary degree of uncertainty into mobilizations.⁵⁰ Weeks later, on 25 February 2003, when testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) about the number of troops required to stabilize Iraq, Shinseki was clear that many more would be needed, remarking that "several hundred thousand soldiers are probably ... required."⁵¹ For this suggestion, he was publicly lambasted by Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz who called Shinseki's estimate "wildly off the mark" and "outlandish."⁵² Although Shinseki's retirement that summer had been approved well before his comments to the SASC,

Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz's rebuke had a chilling effect across the Department of Defense, and it became clear the administration's intent was to keep this war as minimally invasive as possible.⁵³ Having stifled most of the dissent regarding troop commitments, the OSD next moved to convince the Nation the war would be fought on the cheap as well.

Approximately a month after Shinseki's testimony before the SASC, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz testified before the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee regarding the cost of reconstruction in Iraq. In their testimony, both leaders made clear to the American public that it would not bear the cost of reconstruction, not through taxes and certainly not through an outmoded construct like war bonds. Wolfowitz stated, "We're dealing with a country that can really finance its own reconstruction and relatively soon."⁵⁴ Rumsfeld took it a step further with his remarks stating, "I don't believe the United States has the responsibility for reconstruction ... and the funds can come from those various sources I mentioned: frozen assets, oil revenues and a variety of other things ..."⁵⁵ According to Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz, this new, self-funding war would not require America's "full-measure," and they would do all in their power to prevent it from imposing on the public.

The citizenry largely obliged and instead of sacrificing through increased taxes, carpooling, or the like, the Nation went about its business uninterrupted. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the public was told to go to Disney World, and what was once a collective, national burden was placed entirely on the shoulders of the AVF.⁵⁶ Ironically, in a war heavily influenced by America's interest in oil, instead of taking measures to reduce this dependency, 2003 and 2004 witnessed the only consecutive, two-year decrease in average fuel efficiency for light trucks since 2000.⁵⁷ It seemed as though patriotism had been reduced to buying a large, gas-guzzling truck and placing an American flag sticker on the bumper. While able to shield the public from the financial burden of war by shifting the cost to later generations, soldiers cannot be purchased on credit, and as the short, cheap war ground into a protracted insurgency, the administration relied on the Total Force Concept to deliver them.

The NCA did not shy away from using the Reserve Component to meet the needs of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and with over 143,000 National



Guard and Reserve troops mobilized by June 2003, it appeared as though Abrams succeeded in ensuring the Nation never again went to war without the Reserves.⁵⁸ However, if Abrams and the architects of the Total Force Concept intended it to function as a check on the president's ability to use force abroad, it certainly failed in this regard. As public disapproval with the war grew so too did the number of Reserve Component troops serving in it, with over 250,000 National Guard members serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom, and upward of 183,000 Reservists having deployed to either Iraq or Afghanistan by 2009.⁵⁹ Although tough, the disruptions caused by National Guard and Reserve mobilizations were not enough to trigger a serious reconsideration of the war; however, the administration's reliance on a seldom used Cold War personnel policy to make ends meet certainly caught the public's attention.

As the Total Force buckled but did not break, the Bush administration kept with their intent to avoid placing any war-related burden on the populace and, instead, leveraged the Stop Loss program to meet the increasing personnel requirements of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Created by the Department of Defense Authorization Act of 1984, Stop Loss enables the

The newly confirmed Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz (*right*) emphasizes a point as he talks to reporters in the Pentagon on 1 March 2001. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (*left*) introduced Wolfowitz to reporters during a Pentagon news briefing. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Department of Defense)

president to suspend retirements and separations during periods of national emergency or a presidential call-up of the Reserve Component.⁶⁰ Under this program, service members assigned to a unit slated for deployment, whose separation is scheduled to occur either during the deployment or within ninety days thereof, are involuntarily extended through the deployment until ninety days after return. Although not its first use, 2001 to 2009 witnessed the greatest application of Stop Loss since 1984, with over 185,000 service members involuntarily extended for deployments to either Iraq or Afghanistan.⁶¹ This, in effect, became a "backdoor draft," where the only citizens compelled to serve were those who had volunteered in the first place. The program wholly shifted the Nation's wartime burden to the AVF and the public took notice. The program was so prevalent that even Paramount Pictures

got into the action with its 2008 film *Stop-Loss*, chronicling the hardships of Staff Sgt. Brandon King, played by Ryan Phillippe, as he faced an involuntary deployment to Iraq.⁶² Although fictional, the film reinforced several popular themes that characterized the Iraq war in the public psyche: the objectives were dubious, the deployments were arbitrary and numerous, and the Army was callous and unsympathetic. Outside of movie theaters, the extent to which the administration used the Stop Loss program to confine the hardships of war

in 2022.⁶⁴ Likewise, fewer Americans are choosing to serve, and since 1973, the percent of the population on active duty has halved, from 1 percent to less than 0.5 percent.⁶⁵ Effectively neutralizing one-third of Clausewitz's renowned trinity, the government and the military have been left to fight the Nation's wars without the people. This model has conditioned the American public to eschew military service for five decades, leaving the United States at a severe disadvantage when it comes time to rally for the next big war.

“ When asked what single, Iraq-related issue [the lieutenant colonel] would raise with President George W. Bush if given the chance, the officer responded, ‘We’re at war, America’s at the mall.’ ”

to the AVF further conditioned the public to believe they had no obligation to serve and were unlikely to be called upon to do so. Not only did this degrade public trust, as it presented the military as not keeping its bargain with service members, but it also widened the chasm between society and the military, a military increasingly exhausted by the frequency of deployments and the administration's unwillingness to spread the burden. In a candid 2006 interview, a lieutenant colonel deployed to Baghdad summarized both the overwhelming frustration with, and the inherent shortcoming of, the AVF. When asked what single, Iraq-related issue he would raise with President George W. Bush if given the chance, the officer responded, “We’re at war, America’s at the mall.”⁶³

The Government, the Military, and the People

Since the return to the AVF, American citizens have become increasingly divorced from the business, the sacrifice, and the effects of war-making. However, this unhealthy social dynamic is not their fault, but the product of fifty years of conditioning to rely on the AVF. Indicators of the widening gulf between the military and the people abound and are not trending positively. In addition to 2022's dismal recruiting results, public trust and confidence in the military have fallen sharply from 70 percent in 2017 to 48 percent

No matter how well trained and equipped they may be, 0.5 percent of the Nation is a woeful representation of national will. While the populace would likely answer the call to arms for an attack on the United States, it is doubtful they will do so for an attack on the Penghu, Senkaku, or Kinmen islands—all potential flash points in the next war. This leaves the AVF in a precarious situation as it prepares for wars it lacks the influence to prevent and may not have the will to win.

Colored by the lessons of Vietnam, both the Abrams and Weinberger Doctrines sought to preserve the vital link between the people and the military by ensuring the former maintained “skin in the game” and the latter was not abused in wars of want. Adhering to these, it was assumed, would confirm the strength of will at home necessary to win abroad. With the George H. W. Bush administration applying both doctrines during Operation Desert Storm, the AVF's stunning success appeared to validate it as the optimal manning construct. In reality, the AVF was a victim of its own success, and the message received was that the American populace could stay home as its military could win without them. Thereafter, the AVF fit nicely in that brief period of American hegemony that prompted Francis Fukuyama to coin the “end of history.”⁶⁶ Without a peer threat on the horizon, surely the AVF was up to the task of deposing formerly third-world despots and hunting terrorists. Unfortunately,

the George W. Bush administration's neglect of the Weinberger Doctrine in 2003 left the AVF to prosecute a messy, protracted counterinsurgency under dubious pretense in pursuit of vague objectives. The Pentagon, struggling to meet personnel requirements, relied on the Stop Loss program to involuntarily extend volunteer soldiers, thereby shielding the public from the effects of war. Going a step further, the administration's general messaging after the events of 9/11 encouraged its citizens to vacation, shop, and dine; gone were tax increases, victory gardens, or any other vestige of sacrifice. Although conceptually admirable, the Abrams Doctrine overestimated the Reserve Component's ability to affect popular will and it was unable to

prevent the fiasco in Iraq. All of this has resulted in a very sick trinity and a Nation ill-prepared to prosecute the protracted, expeditionary campaigns it is likely to face in the future. Adjusting course requires reconditioning the American people to recognize service as an obligatory part of citizenship through the creation of a blended force of conscripts and volunteers sized to meet annual requirements. The Nation's adversaries all recognize the importance of their populace in waging war, it's time the United States does the same. ■

The views expressed are the author's alone and do not reflect the views of the Joint Staff, U.S. Army, or Department of Defense.

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