

No Final Draft

Doug Bandow

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Washington is fighting a proxy war-plus with Russia, threatening China over Taiwan, mobilizing troops to confront Iran, and promising to use nuclear weapons to defend South Korea. Yet the Pentagon is failing to recruit sufficient numbers of men and women. As the all-volunteer force runs short on manpower, some policymakers are thinking the once unthinkable, a return to conscription.

A half-century ago, Richard Nixon ended the draft and withdrew the last combat forces from South Vietnam. Despite a rough start, the all-volunteer force delivered the highest quality military that America ever fielded. President George W. Bush's Iraq debacle sapped popular enthusiasm for joining the armed forces, making it harder for the Pentagon to attract recruits, but the numbers returned to health as that conflict ended. Alas, rising demographic and budget problems today likely will prove more difficult to solve.

Relatively few 18-year-olds are qualified to serve—increasing obesity is one challenge—and interested in joining. Only the Marine Corps, the second-smallest branch of the military, is expected to make its objective this year. Both the Army and Air Force likely will be about 10,000 people short, and the Navy figures it will be 6,000 behind. Last year the Air Force missed its manpower target by 25 percent.

These estimates likely underestimate the gap between military wishes and recruit realities. Knowing that it will be hard to find sufficient new accessions, as enlistees are termed, encourages military leaders to trim their manpower objectives. Two years ago Army Chief of Staff Gen. James McConville admitted that he wanted to add 70,000 to the force of nearly 485,000. Instead, he reduced the number by 12,000.

The Army vice chief of staff, Gen. Randy A. George, believes the solution is selling the armed services as a step up:

The trouble is, many Americans don't realize it or believe it. Military service, to many people, seems like a life setback. In reality, it's a life accelerator. That has certainly been my experience since I enlisted as a private right out of high school. It's a great team with an important mission and ample opportunity to learn, grow and make an impact. And we have to get that story out.

What if potential recruits don't believe him? It was one thing to join the military to combat the infamous Evil Empire, which seemed to threaten all that mattered. But dying to seize nonexistent nukes in Iraq, remake rural theocracy in Central Asia, and protect a gaggle of licentious Mideast royals? Or playing wet nurse to the Europeans, who almost eight decades after the end of World War II still act helpless when confronting Moscow?

Moreover, why would any sensible recruit—speaking as someone whose father, mother, uncle, brother-in-law, and nephew all served—want to submit to the current political leadership? The egregious Madeleine Albright spoke for America’s arrogant, self-serving ruling class when she asked Gen. Colin Powell: “What’s the point of having this superb military you’re always talking about if we can’t use it?” To members of the infamous foreign policy “blob,” those in uniform are but a cheap means to an imperial end.

Indeed, the Pentagon’s sales pitch faces surprising opposition from relatives, friends, and even veterans. Reported the *Wall Street Journal*:

The children of military families make up the majority of new recruits in the US military. That pipeline is now under threat, which is bad news for the Pentagon’s already acute recruit problems, as well as America’s military readiness. “Influencers are not telling them to go into the military,” said Adm. Mike Mullen, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in an interview. “Moms and dads, uncles, coaches and pastors don’t see it as a good choice.”

Moreover, enlisted personnel, who make up the bulk of the service, and their families are less likely to recommend that their children volunteer.

Such dissatisfaction reflects multiple causes, including low pay and family stress. Incompetent, stupid wars are another. More than 7,000 US military personnel and nearly 8,000 contractors died in combat since 9/11. A shocking 30,000 military personnel and veterans of the “Global War on Terrorism” committed suicide over the same period. At least 52,000 service members were wounded in combat. However, the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs figures that the number harmed “is exponentially larger” since the Defense Department does not count other injuries in theater as well as conditions diagnosed later.

What if Washington is unable to maintain a volunteer military large enough to dominate the globe? It isn’t easy to simultaneously protect wimpy but wealthy Europeans, combat insurgents and terrorists across ever-unstable Africa, maintain a gaggle of undemocratic Mideast monarchies against their peoples, protect rich friends in Asia, and contain nationalistic China.

Support for conscription ebbed after President Ronald Reagan addressed recruitment problems. Even during the military’s brief Iraq-related travails few policymakers advocated a draft. However, the 2020 election featured several Democratic presidential candidates, including now Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, urging mandatory national service.

More recently the conscription-friendly All-Volunteer Force Forum held a conference on the issue. Dennis Laich, a retired major general, worried about the flip-side of the recruitment problem, that paying higher compensation in response could be too expensive: “There just won’t be enough money to go around.” He also argued, along with another retired Army officer, Larry Wilkerson, that a draft is required “because a combination of ever-growing missions for the military and outside pressures on the dollars being spent their [stet] will force it.” Other participants backed various forms of coerced service.

The latest advocate is a retired Marine, Joe Plenzler:

We should have our military recruiters sign up new troops for 11 months out of the year, and then have the Selective Service draft the delta between the military's needs and the total number recruited. This model would alleviate the incredible pressure on our recruiters, lower the cost of finding new troops, and significantly reduce the much decried civilian-military gap by subjecting all of America's youth—rich and poor—to the possibility of military service via the draft.

Even limited conscription is an extraordinarily bad idea. It would be wildly unfair to those drafted, taking only a few thousand of the four million Americans who turn 18 every year. Compulsion would foster both avoidance and evasion—remember Dick “I had other priorities” Cheney? That in turn would require an expensive enforcement regime, extravagantly so given the very few people to be impressed. Since conscription would fill any unmet “needs,” the armed services would be tempted to inflate their requirements and devote less effort to meeting recruiting objectives.

Plenzler also tried moral blackmail, arguing that “military service is an important responsibility of citizenship.” *Defending the nation* might be such a responsibility, but not patrolling the globe, playing international social engineer, guarding corrupt authoritarians, and using war for mundane economic and political ends, which account for most of the Pentagon’s activities. Moreover, military service isn’t the only way to help protect the homeland. Conscription is the wrong answer to a very simple problem.

Washington expects the armed services to do far too much. The military’s official manpower objectives should not be taken as a given, as if one of the Ten Commandments. Moving to conscription would make war too easy, allowing any administration to quickly crank up personnel levels to prosecute another unpopular and stupid war, like Vietnam, or more recently Iraq and Afghanistan.

Plenzler’s tiny draft would not inhibit promiscuous war-making because so few people would be taken. The likelihood that the children of influential policymakers would be drafted is infinitesimal and would not likely inhibit the foreign policy establishment’s enthusiasm for war. (A better idea would be “a targeted draft enlisting the children of Pentagon brass and members of Congress,” but even that would have to be much broader, dragooning Washington’s most enthusiastic warmongers, to have much effect.)

The best way to address recruiting shortfalls would be to reduce manpower objectives. First, policymakers in both the executive and legislative branches should abandon the pursuit of primacy and shed rather than share burdens best carried by other states. George observed that soldiers are stationed in more than 140 countries. It beggars belief that most or even a majority of these deployments serve an important let alone a vital U.S. interest.

Europe is richer and possesses a much greater population than Russia. The continent should take over its own defense. The Middle East matters less internationally and especially to the U.S. Friendly states, most notably Israel and the Gulf monarchies, should cooperate to balance against potentially more aggressive states, such as Iran. South Korea is well able to defend against its impoverished northern neighbor at least in conventional terms. And friendly Asian states, including Japan and India, are capable of constraining potential Chinese aggression.

Second, Washington should adapt its force structure to changing geopolitics. Army strength should be shifted to reserve units. The likelihood of U.S. involvement in a massive land war in either Asia or Europe is minuscule—at least, launching a ground campaign against either China or Russia would be idiotic, even criminal. Genuine defense resources should be concentrated on sea and air power, which are less people-intensive. Making such a shift would be difficult politics at home, but perhaps no harder than reinstating conscription.

Third, the American people should decide how much they are prepared to spend and risk to achieve proposed foreign ends. Washington should have the interests of Americans at its core. What potential conflicts are worth fighting, especially ones that could go nuclear? Is a national security state, including coercive military service, consistent with the freedom values that make America worth defending? The costs of one or another endless military interventions likely outweigh any plausible gain. Attracting enough recruits for even a more limited foreign policy might still be difficult and expensive. However, it would be easier to ask America's young to defend a democratic republic than to advance a reckless empire.

Whatever Washington seeks to do internationally, it requires leaders “who can articulate our purposes both for the American people and the armed forces.” Equally important, those purposes must be *legitimate*. Dragging one's countrymen into an unnecessary war is bad. Forcing one's countrymen to fight in an unnecessary war is unforgivable. Conscription is no solution to the challenges facing the nation's volunteer military.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.