



## What if Washington Can't Attract the Men (and Women) Necessary To Police the Globe?

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Russia and Ukraine are at war, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates have spent more than seven years attempting to subject Yemen, Syria continues to smolder, and Iraq remains a sectarian powder keg. The US is deeply involved militarily in all these conflicts. Yet worse could come. China is threatening Taiwan, which enjoys an informal US security guarantee.

The US also is waging economic war against Venezuela, Iran, and North Korea, as well as Syria and Russia. Influential interests have urged Washington to launch kinetic operations against all of them. Find a war or hear a rumor of war anywhere on earth, and Washington is likely to be involved in some way.

The foreign policy establishment remains determined to dominate international events irrespective of the cost in blood and treasure. As federal spending races wildly ahead, the national debt rockets upward, and inflation rages, President Joe Biden insists that "America is better positioned to lead the world than we ever have been." This delusion is widespread as ivory tower elites share the late Madeleine Albright's belief that they see further and should decide the price paid by others, and that there's no use having America's "superb military" if they don't use it. Washington, D.C. remains the eternal imperial city.

Alas for the US, it is not only foreigners who suffer, often in prodigious numbers, from Washington's myriad military misadventures. Americans do too. More than 7000 US personnel and nearly 8000 contractors have died in combat since 9/11. Some 30,000 military personnel and veterans of the "terrorism" wars committed suicide over the last two decades. Another 52,000 were wounded in combat, but the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs contends that the number harmed by their service "is exponentially larger" since Pentagon accounting does not include other injuries in theater as well as conditions diagnosed after personnel return home.

Contra the reigning ideology in Washington, US military personnel requirements are not immutable. American foreign policy can be more or less ambitious. The principle cost of the approach chosen is the military budget. Policymakers should first propose what they want to do

in the world. Second, they should figure out the price of that policy. Third, they should decide if the benefits are worth the cost.

However, that rarely is how Washington operates. Today the Blob, as the foreign establishment is called, simply assumes that America must rule the world. Believing this to be a mandatory duty, a version of "the Mandate of Heaven," as Chinese emperors called it, Republicans typically propose massive increases in military outlays, decrying anything less as leaving the world liable to fall into a new Dark Ages, with communists and terrorists destined to take over cities across America. Leading Democrats, aside from a few bedraggled progressives, respond with proposals to spend slightly less, leaving a difference of little consequence other than to help them posture as peace-loving liberals. Joining together, Republicans and Democrats together push outlays inexorably upward. Such has been the case under the Biden administration so far.

Yet the armed services' good times may not last forever. Simply dumping more money into the Pentagon may become impossible as the Baby Boomer generation retires and entitlement outlays absorb ever more of the federal budget. If forced to choose between foreign adventures and domestic benefits, the American people might finally tell the military no more.

Even if the money continues to flow, the armed services may face an even bigger problem. What if too few people are both qualified and willing to join the armed forces, even at higher pay, to preserve Washington's hegemonic pretensions?

With a volunteer military political leaders must convince young men and women to serve. And that is proving increasingly difficult. In April service representatives warned that 2022 was "arguably the most challenging recruiting year" since the All-Volunteer Force's creation a half century ago. Finding recruits willing to die for Washington's imperial pretensions is proving especially difficult for the Army. Chief of Staff Gen. James McConville said he would have preferred to add 70,000 to last year's force of nearly 485,000 soldiers. Instead, he had to cut the number to 473,000.

Numerous small fixes have been advanced to address manpower shortages. Add recruiters, increase retention of existing personnel, use new approaches to reach younger Americans, encourage physical fitness in school, hire laterally for specialty roles, reduce reasons for disqualification, adjust military life to appeal to a new generation, and even deploy robots. These and other steps might help at the margin. However, the fundamental problem of too few qualified potential recruits willing to enlist would remain. Which leaves Sen. Thom Tillis (R-NC) "worried we're now in the early days of a long-term threat to the all-volunteer force, with a small and declining number of Americans who are eligible and interested in military service."

Where will Washington policymakers find the youth expected to act as guardians of the most violent and distant parts of America's vast global empire? Some desperate policymakers urge a return to conscription. Coercion remains in vogue in many countries around the world, such as Russia, Belarus, North Korea, and Syria. Retired army officers Dennis Laich and Larry Wilkerson believe a draft is necessary in America "because a combination of ever-growing missions for the military and outside pressures on the dollars being spent their [stet] will force it."

In short, in their view not enough young men and women are willing to serve, especially at a price Uncle Sam can afford. So more of them must be forced into uniform at penurious wages. (This is not a new position. Years ago at a conference on conscription the retired, and highly compensated, Gen. William Westmoreland told me that conscripts should be paid "cigarette money.") If you can't convince graduating high school students to sign up, no problem: just put a gun to their head.

There are many practical reasons why this would be a bad idea. Conscription isn't cheap. Rather, it shifts costs onto "new accessions," as they are called. Unless a draft is for life, the military still must pay competitive wages to those it hopes will re-enlist, as well as officers like Westmoreland, who don't work for "cigarette money." (Rank has its privileges, as the saying goes!) Anyway, if saving money is the most important objective, why not conscript congressional staff, civil service managers, postal workers, and civilian defense personnel?

More important, draftees typically have little motivation to serve, invest in skills, or re-enlist. If they act up, kicking them out of uniform is a reward, not punishment. The AVF provided higher quality personnel than conscription, at least until now, since the Pentagon could be choosy, requiring a high school degree or GED and minimum score on the Armed Forces Qualification Test. (A couple weeks ago the US Army announced that it was suspending the former requirement, only to quickly backtrack after sustained criticism.) Finally, with annual accessions under 200,000, a draft would be highly unfair, dragooning but a small share of the four million Americans who turn 18 every year. Adding a civilian "service" program would be even worse, in effect drafting people to clean up parks and empty bedpans.

Finally, conscription remains unlikely politically absent a credible argument that it is necessary for national survival. The Korean and Vietnam Wars should have failed that test, but they occurred during the Cold War, when the specter of the Soviet Union carried all before it. Today no adversary is nearly as dangerous as the latter.

Few believe that the US had a compelling need to occupy Afghanistan and invade Iraq. The detritus of American foreign policy, such as proposals for defense guarantees for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, are even worse: proposing to dragoon young Americans into service because young Saudis and Emiratis believe military service is beneath them and should be hired out. As for Russia and China, however threatening they might be to other nations, neither shows any interest in attacking America. Rather, the US is attempting to dominate *their neighborhoods* along *their borders*. There are plenty of populous, prosperous states friendly to America capable of doing a lot more to deter Russian and Chinese aggression. In any case, America's interests in those regions are not existential, and do not warrant forcing young Americans to fight and die.

So what if the US runs out of money and recruits?

Rather than desperately cast about for ways to expand an already bloated military, Washington policymakers should begin setting foreign policy priorities. Which means leaving allies to defend themselves. For instance, Europe has a substantially larger population than America, and much greater than Russia, yet the US continues to send more troops to Europe. Washington added

some 20,000 personnel after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Explained CNN: "The US is expected to keep 100,000 troops stationed in Europe for the foreseeable future . . . . The numbers could temporarily increase if NATO carries out more military exercises in the region, and the US could add additional bases in Europe if the security environment changes, the officials added."

That's not all. A couple months ago Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, backed establishing permanent bases in Eastern Europe. At last week's NATO summit the Pentagon announced new deployments in Europe, which "included extending a Carrier Strike Group, deploying additional fighter squadrons and lift/tanker aircraft, and deploying an Amphibious Readiness Group and Marine Expeditionary Force. DoD added a Corps Headquarters, Division Headquarters, Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT), Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT), High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) battalion, and multiple enablers to the existing Corps Forward Command Post, Division Headquarters, and three BCTs already stationed in or deployed to Europe."

Moreover, Washington remains unnecessarily entangled throughout the Middle East. Why? Egypt has more than enough troops to tyrannize its civilian population; Cairo doesn't need America's help. Israel is a regional superpower and also can take care of itself. Syria is a tragic nation that barely survives and threatens no one, especially America. Iraq can muddle through without a US military presence. The KSA and UAE are vile dictatorships which hold their own people in bondage. US military personnel shouldn't be used as de facto royal bodyguards. The emerging alliance between Israel and the Gulf States serves as a military counterweight to Iran.

Three successive administrations planned to pivot to the Pacific, but the rebalancing promised should be conducted by America's allies and friends. South Korea has 50 times the GDP and twice the population of the North: why does Washington still garrison the peninsula? Worse, why should Japan continue to cheap ride on America? Proposals that Tokyo up its military outlays to two percent of GDP are welcome, but long-overdue, still inadequate, and planned too far in the future. Indeed, they might never occur unless the US stops treating Japan as a defense dependent. Other states nervous about Chinese and North Korean adventurism also should augment their forces.

For decades much of the "free world," as the motley collection of American client states was called, depended on US military personnel. Through 1973 Washington forced its citizens into uniform. They patrolled much of the globe, and many died in combat, most promiscuously in Vietnam.

Over the last half century, the US armed services relied on volunteers. However, enthusiasm for the rigors of military life has ebbed. Moreover, few young people desire to serve in stupid wars in which one could lose one's life fulfilling the fantasies of Washington's ivory tower warriors. Imagine avoiding Vietnam, only to die in Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, or Syria.

No wonder the propensity to serve is down. For a time, the Pentagon found it difficult to attract new soldiers during much of the Iraq war. Now the US Army was forced to downsize because of young people's increasing reluctance to enlist. Attribute that to the public's good sense.

Washington should respond by doing more "leading from behind," as President Barack Obama called it. Other countries should take over protecting their own interests. Which includes providing military personnel to defend their governments, societies, and nations. If America runs short on new recruits the US should shrink its geopolitical ambitions. The young shouldn't be expected to die for the dubious grand designs of today's governing elites.

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