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Book Review: Tracing voluntary military service

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America possesses the world's most dominant military. One reason is spending: The United States accounts for almost half of global military outlays. Another cause is advanced technology, which the Pentagon possesses in abundance.

Most important, however, are the dedicated, smart and professional personnel who employ the military's sophisticated weapons. They are a direct outgrowth of the creation of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF).

Beth Bailey has written an accessible and informative history of the AVF. It's a valuable reference work for anyone interested in the armed forces. The book has added value today, given the strain under which the military has found itself in fighting lengthy insurgencies in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Early Americans were obligated to serve, but only in militias for local defense. The nation's Founders could not have imagined today's imperial military, deployed so often around the globe.

Both South and North resorted to conscription in the Civil War. The federal government imposed a draft in World War I and then in 1940, as World War II impended. With only a brief break, conscription continued until 1973.

Despite the veneer of fairness, notes Ms. Bailey: "the selective service system - as its name makes clear - was not about universality. This system was designed by men inspired by a progressive faith in the value of scientific expertise and efficiency. They sought the most practical basis for managing manpower, both within the military and without."

The unpopularity of the Vietnam War applied the coup de grace to the draft. Ms. Bailey explains: "Paradoxically, it was the Vietnam War that made the transformation to an all-volunteer force possible. The war created a perfect political storm. It divided the nation, but it also gave legitimacy to vastly different arguments justifying the move to an all-volunteer force."

The Vietnam War increasingly was seen as foolish, even immoral, especially by those conscripted to fight it. The rising unpopularity of the war and resistance to coerced service created a political opening for the presidential candidate of the opposition Republican Party.

Writes Ms. Bailey: "Two-and-a-half weeks before the presidential election, Richard Nixon went live on CBS' national radio network and, at the height of America's involvement in the Vietnam War, called for an end to the draft. It was a politically opportunistic and Nixon-esque move, timed for the critical days before the election and meant to indicate his willingness to take bold action, his ability to resolve the national crisis."

Yet Nixon turned his promise into law, despite opposition within the military and Congress. Pushed by White House aide Martin Anderson, a former professor at Columbia University, and endorsed by the President's Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force, the AVF took flight on

July 1, 1973.

Ms. Bailey details the hard work behind such a dramatic switch. The military brass, particularly Army Chief of Staff William Westmoreland, was by no means enthused. However, the Pentagon met the critical challenges, such as creating an effective recruiting campaign for an Army that had lost much of its reputation in an unpopular war and navigating the sensitive shoals of race and class when setting quality standards for recruits.

The AVF's most troubled time occurred during the Carter years. Personnel quality and morale were low, as personnel compensation and service respect lagged. Support for reinstatement of conscription grew in both parties.

But presidential candidate Ronald Reagan firmly opposed the draft. With AVF father Martin Anderson serving in the Reagan White House, the new administration dramatically turned the volunteer military around.

Since then, the United States has developed the most sophisticated and effective armed forces on Earth. The key is reliance on volunteers - who choose to join, serve for longer terms and are more intelligent, better trained and more positively motivated than were their conscripted forebears.

More than three decades later, the military continues to confront the challenges of social change. Women now play a much larger role in the military. Observes Ms. Bailey: "Women, even Ronald Reagan's Pentagon believed, were key to the survival of the AVF."

Acceptance of gays has become the new social battleground. Out of the Clinton administration grew "don't ask, don't tell," which satisfied no one. The issue is back under President Obama.

Ironically, conscription re-emerged as an issue during the Bush administration. Officials consistently promoted the military, but it proved difficult to sustain two simultaneous anti-insurgency campaigns. Recruiting became more difficult and quality dipped, though the latter remained well above that of the draft-era force.

Moreover, re-enlistment rates fell, in part because the military demography has changed. Writes Ms. Bailey: "Research found that soldiers' decisions about reenlistment were heavily influenced by family concerns. And morale, it became obvious, was closely linked to the stability and satisfaction of soldiers' families." As the war in Iraq ebbed, recruiting recovered.

In any case, there is no serious political support for a return to conscription. Concludes Ms. Bailey: "In most ways, the discussion is moot. Short of massive, total war, the United States is not going to reinstate the draft. There is little public desire; there is no political will. The majority of citizens in this democratic nation have chosen to define military service as a choice rather than as obligation. In practical terms, a volunteer force provides best for the defense of the nation. An institution that once seemed mired in crisis has achieved remarkable successes, both as purveyor of military force and provider of social good. The history of the all-volunteer army is, in very many ways, a tale of progress and achievement."

Ms. Bailey worries about when "the rights and benefits of citizenship become less closely linked to its duties and obligations," but a volunteer military is the only consistent means to defend a society based on individual liberty. A society unable to convince its citizens to come forward and defend it, and whose government is unable to persuade people of the necessity of the wars which it chooses to initiate, has no right to force its people into uniform to fight and die.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the **Cato Institute**. While a former special assistant to President Reagan, he worked with the military Manpower Task Force. He is the author of several books, including "Human Resources and Defense Manpower" (National Defense University, 1989).

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AMERICA'S ARMY: MAKING THE ALL-VOLUNTEER FORCE

By Beth Bailey

The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, \$29.95, 352 pages

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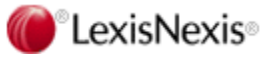
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