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The All-Volunteer Force: The Debate

Paul Yingling

I'd like to share with *SWJ* readers the debate I've been having with current and former senior defense leaders on the deficiencies of the all-volunteer force.

This past February, I published "The Founder's Wisdom" in *Armed Forces Journal*. While the article addressed many aspects of Congressional and popular oversight of national security issues, the issue that provoked the strongest reaction was the portion concerning the all-volunteer military. I argued that:

"The U.S. should therefore abandon the all-volunteer military and return to our historic reliance on citizen soldiers and conscription to wage protracted war. This approach proved successful in both world wars and offers several advantages over the all-volunteer military. First and most important, this approach demands popular participation in national security decisions and provides Congress with powerful incentives to reassert its war powers. Unlike the all-volunteer force, a conscripted force of citizen soldiers would ensure that the burdens of war are felt equally in every community in America.

Second, this approach provides the means to expand the Army to a sufficient size to meet its commitments. Unlike the all-volunteer force, a conscripted force would not rely on stop-loss policies or an endless cycle of year-on, year-off deployments of overstressed and exhausted forces. Third, conscription enables the military to be more discriminating in selecting those with the skills and attributes most required to fight today's wars.

Unlike the all-volunteer force, a conscripted force would not rely on exorbitant bonuses and reduced enlistment standards to fill its ranks.

Finally, this approach would be less expensive. Unlike the world wars of the 20th century, today's dangers will not pass quickly, allowing for a return to a smaller and less expensive military establishment. Imposing fiscal discipline on the Pentagon would not only strengthen America's depleted finances, but also constrain executive ambitions for adventures abroad and congressional appetites for pork-barrel projects at home."

Dr. Curtis Gilroy, the Pentagon's Director of Accession Policy, took strong issue with this argument. He published "Defending the All-Volunteer Force" in the April edition of *AFJ*,

arguing that "the all-volunteer force has been an amazing success." However, Gilroy's argument was essentially a repetition of Pentagon talking points on the AVF, and didn't address many of the political and strategic issues raised in my earlier article.

Hoping to generate a more serious dialogue on the AVF, I posed five questions to Dr. Gilroy in the April *AFJ*. These questions focused on the representativeness, cost, quality and size of the AVF. While Dr. Gilroy declined to answer, former Under Secretary of the Army Nelson Ford responded to these questions in the June edition of *AFJ*.

While I appreciate this reply, many of Mr. Ford's answers to my questions have highlighted many of the AVF's deficiencies. Mr. Ford asks for evidence regarding my claim that America's elites are underrepresented in the all-volunteer force. In "America's Casualty Gap" (*Los Angeles Times*, May 28, 2010), Douglas L. Kriner and Francis X. Shen "demonstrate unambiguously that, beginning with the Korean War, disadvantaged communities have suffered a disproportionate share of the nation's wartime casualties, while richer communities have been more insulated from the costs of war." Specifically, Kriner and Shen show that service members wounded and killed in Iraq on average come from neighborhoods whose income and educational levels are significantly below national averages. I also recommend "AWOL: The Unexcused Absence of America's Upper Classes from Military Service - and How It Hurts Our Country" by Kathy Roth-Douquet and Frank Schaeffer (HarperCollins Publishers, 2006).

Mr. Ford asks if I believe that we should track the degree to which the wealthiest 5%, or even the wealthiest 1%, of Americans serve in our Armed Forces. My answer is yes. This analysis would be easy to do and would tell us conclusively the degree to which the most privileged Americans serve in our military and fight our wars. The Pentagon should conduct this analysis immediately, and make the results public.

Mr. Ford asks why we should increase standards for service members fighting our wars, and how a draft would achieve this goal. We should increase standards for service members because the demands of today's battlefield - physically, psychologically and morally - are higher than ever before. The AVF has proven unable to meet these demands; even as battlefield demands went up, enlistment standards went down. A draft could increase the standards for enlistment and provide sufficient forces to fight our wars without relying on repetitive combat deployments or stop-loss personnel policies to fill our ranks.

Like Dr. Gilroy, Mr. Ford claims that the AVF is cheaper than a conscripted force. This argument would be true if raising an army and committing it to war were merely exercises in labor economics, devoid of strategic and political consequences. In fact, the opposite is true - the manner in which our army is raised profoundly affects the care with which it is employed. I'll ask Mr. Ford the same question Dr. Gilroy has declined to answer: Does Mr. Ford believe that the United States would have gone to war in Iraq if doing so had imposed conscription and higher taxes on the public?

Mr. Ford claims that "the supply of new recruits has been strong throughout the current conflicts." However, he does not mention that the number of high school graduates dropped from 90 percent to 79 percent between 2001 and 2007, and that despite these lowered standards

DoD struggled to meet its recruiting goals after 2003 and failed altogether in 2005. These omissions are particularly puzzling given that Mr. Ford was an assistant secretary of the Army during this same period.

Mr. Ford argues that the lack of dwell time is due to combatant commanders underestimating troop requirements in Iraq and Afghanistan. This claim is partially true, accurately describing the period from 2001 until 2007. However, since 2007 CENTCOM's projections have been far more realistic, and yet the services continue to lack sufficient ground forces to meet dwell time requirements.

Mr. Ford concludes that "we shouldn't confuse the strong analytic case for an all-volunteer force with the short-term struggle to supply sufficient forces to meet the demand of a particular policy." Unfortunately, this "strong analytic case" makes no mention of the human cost of war. There is no consideration for the damage caused to soldiers and families from repetitive, year-long combat tours, including soaring rates of suicide, PTSD, and substance abuse. Nor is there any acknowledgment that these ills are made worse by policy choices that lay the heavy burdens of war on too few shoulders.

Raising an Army is not merely a matter of labor economics - finding the right combination of wages, benefits and marketing strategies to fill job vacancies. Raising an Army is a profoundly political act with profoundly political consequences. The issues of who fights and who pays for America's wars are ultimately questions about our conceptions of justice and civic obligation. My hope is that our debate about the merits of the all-volunteer force will move beyond questions of wages and benefits, and focus on these larger issues of justice and civic obligation.

As this "short-term struggle" approaches its tenth year, cheerful portrayals of the AVF are no longer plausible. It's time for the United States to reconsider the wisdom of the all-volunteer force.

I look forward to the always superb commentary by *SWJ* readers on this debate, and I hope that Dr. Gilroy and Mr. Ford will join us.

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