

55. Strengthening the All-Volunteer Military

Policymakers should

- devote additional resources to recruiting programs and enlistment inducements,
- increase benefits for hard-to-fill occupational specialties,
- change the mix of active and Reserve forces to reflect current military commitments,
- consider creating special Reserve units designed for garrison duty,
- fully withdraw U.S. forces from outdated Cold War deployments in Asia and Europe,
- accelerate turnover of authority in Iraq and the pullout of American troops,
- reduce the frequency and length of overseas tours,
- cut force levels and increasingly devolve defense responsibilities to allied states, and
- drop draft registration and eliminate the Selective Service System.

Three decades ago the United States inaugurated the All-Volunteer Force. The AVF produced the world's finest military, capable of deterring superpower competitors and coercing regional powers with relative ease.

Today, however, the U.S. military is under enormous strain. Although it is the finest fighting force on the planet, it lacks sufficient strength to satisfy the demands of an imperial foreign policy. The ongoing military occupation of Iraq necessitated a massive troop rotation to relieve U.S. forces deployed in that country, but that rotation did nothing to reduce pressure on American service personnel.

The United States has managed so far by turning the Reserves and the National Guard into de facto active duty units. But the Bush administration risks driving down recruitment and retention for both active and Reserve forces. Some members of Congress are promoting a return to conscription. Warns Rep. Charles Rangel (D-NY): “The experts are all saying we’re going to have to beef up our presence in Iraq. We’ve failed to convince our allies to send troops, we’ve extended deployments so morale is sinking, and the president is saying we can’t cut and run. So what’s left?”

Unfortunately, no relief for the U.S. military is in the offing. About 10,000 U.S. troops remain in Afghanistan. Despite dramatic initial success, Washington now must cope with increasing attacks on coalition soldiers and foreign aid workers outside the capital. Elections were postponed as the internal security situation deteriorated.

Iraq

Iraq is of greater concern. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld once opined that the number of U.S. troops there could fall to 30,000 by fall 2003. But the garrison currently numbers roughly 160,000, about 140,000 of whom are American. (Another 34,000 perform support duties in Kuwait.) The coalition has made progress in restoring services and rebuilding infrastructure. Yet the administration’s goal of creating a liberal, pro-Western democracy remains far distant.

The Iraqi conflict is taking a heavy toll on the U.S. military: not only the thousands of dead and wounded, but the unexpected and unexpectedly lengthy deployments to Iraq. Although administration supporters routinely complained that the media were focusing on bad news, the troops lived the bad news. A poll of 2,000 soldiers in 2003, before the worst of the violence, by *Stars and Stripes*, a newspaper for members of the armed forces funded by the Department of Defense, found that 40 percent believed the Iraq mission was unrelated to their training, one-third believed their mission was not clearly defined, and one-third believed the Iraqi war was of limited value.

After having to face the reality that drawing down the U.S. force in Iraq to 30,000 troops was an overly optimistic plan, the administration hoped to bring down the U.S. garrison to about 110,000 in spring 2004. But that proved to be another example of hysterically high hopes ruined by reality as the insurgency intensified. Even now, many analysts believe that more troops are necessary.

But the Pentagon has had trouble finding sufficient soldiers to man its existing commitments. To maintain training standards and troop morale, the Congressional Budget Office suggests “rotation ratios” of 3.2:1 to 4:1 for active forces and 7.5:1 to 9:1 for Reserves and the Guard. Yet of roughly 480,000 Army active duty and 560,000 Army Reserve and Army National Guard forces, 370,000 are deployed overseas. Even that understates the problem. Only about 300,000 active Army personnel and 470,000 Army Reserve and Guard members are in deployable units.

Reserve and National Guard

The burden falls heaviest on reservists. Nearly 40 percent of the Iraq garrison is made up of members of the Reserve and National Guard. The average annual call-up during the 1990s was about 10,000. Lt. Gen. H. Steven Blum, chief of the National Guard Bureau, admits that the “week-end warrior is dead.”

The military can handle such burdens in a temporary emergency. But speaking only of Afghanistan in March 2002, Secretary Rumsfeld observed: “It’s helpful to remember that those who developed the concept for peacekeepers in Bosnia assured everyone that those forces would complete their mission by the end of that year and be home by Christmas. We are now heading into our seventh year of U.S. and international involvement in Bosnia.”

Thomas Donnelly and Vance Serchuk of the American Enterprise Institute suggest that “the protection of the embryonic Iraqi democracy is a duty that will likely extend for decades.” Even President George W. Bush admitted that the United States faced a “massive and long-term undertaking” in Iraq. Democratic challenger John Kerry spoke of trying to reduce the size of America’s garrison within six months and withdrawing troops within four years but nevertheless pledged to stay as long as necessary.

Which brings back Rep. Rangel’s question, “So what’s left?” The administration limited coverage of the return of bodies and of funerals to cut hostile press coverage, but that provided no additional manpower. By fall 2004 allied states were leaving, not coming into, Iraq, and the only serious help came from Great Britain. As Francois Heisbourg, director of the Paris-based Foundation for Strategic Research, bluntly put it, “I don’t think anybody is going to jump into an American-run quagmire.”

Which means Iraq will remain largely an American show. Yet the active forces don’t have much more to contribute. The Pentagon admits that

many infantrymen will have to serve back-to-back foreign tours. Even though deployment in countries like Britain and Germany is more pleasant than in Afghanistan and Iraq, few people will join and remain in the Army if they rarely see home.

Adding Marine Corps actives, as DOD did last spring, will help. But the Marines are a relatively small force (175,000) intended to respond to unexpected contingencies. Warns the Congressional Budget Office, “If all Marine regiments were either deployed, recovering after deployments, or preparing for deployments . . . , DoD’s ability to quickly deploy substantial combat power in the early phases of an operation would be degraded.”

Which leaves the Reserves and National Guard. But those troops are intended to supplement the active force in an emergency. Unfortunately, write Philip Gold and Erin Solaro of the Aretea Institute, Washington is using reservists “not just as reinforcements for the regulars but as substitutes.” The Army Reserve has been mobilized more in the last 12 years (10 times) than in the previous 75 years (9 times). Today Guard and Reserve units handle everything from civil affairs to personnel services.

Extended deployments place a greater burden on reservists than on active duty forces because the former, who consciously chose not to join the active force, must leave not only family, friends, and community but jobs as well. The burden has been compounded by discrimination against reservists, who often serve longer deployments than active duty soldiers but are last on the list to receive the best equipment, such as Kevlar vests. Nevertheless, the military has been pressuring reservists to waive the statutory requirement of 12 months home between overseas deployments.

The Specter of the Draft

Where else can bodies be found? When Gen. Eric Shinseki retired as Army chief of staff in June 2003, he warned, “Beware the 12-division strategy for a 10-division Army.” Support for adding at least two divisions has been building in Congress, and candidate John Kerry backed that addition.

So far the Defense Department has rebuffed such proposals. Adding forces takes money and time. Concludes the Congressional Budget Office: “Recruiting, training, and equipping two additional divisions would entail up-front costs of as much as \$18 billion to \$19 billion and would take about five years to accomplish, CBO estimates. In the long run, the cost to operate and sustain these new divisions as a permanent part of the

Army's force structure would be about \$6 billion annually (plus between \$3 billion and \$4 billion per year to employ them in Iraq)."

Moreover, the armed services are having trouble because excessive and unpleasant commitments make it harder for them to attract and keep enough people. Increasing recruiting and retention requirements won't address the underlying problems.

Publicly, many officials and analysts argue that there is no morale problem. Yet the *Stars and Stripes* interview found that one-third of soldiers said their own morale was low and half said their units' morale was low. Half said they would not reup once their tours end and the DOD's "stop-loss" order, which bars retirements, is lifted. Moreover, the *Stars and Stripes* reported that it was hearing "edgier complaints about inequality among the forces and lack of confidence in their leaders"—complaints stronger than the sort of griping common among enlisted personnel.

Also critical is the attitude of service families. Worried Fox News Channel commentator Robert Maginnis, "Either we find a fix to rotate those troops out and to keep the families content . . . or we're going to suffer what I anticipate is a downturn in retention." Army recruiters are finding increasing resistance from parents, especially when they seek to recruit 17-year-olds, who need parental approval to join.

So far, DOD has been making most of its manpower targets. However, in FY03 the Army National Guard and Navy Reserve fell behind their goals; the former ran 87.4 percent and the latter a less worrisome 98.9 percent. Although attrition rates remained low, Defense Under Secretary David Chu admitted, "Certain high-demand (high-use) units and specialties have experienced higher than normal attrition."

But the situation could easily worsen. Secretary Rumsfeld acknowledges that "the effects of stress on the force are unlikely to be felt immediately; they're much more likely to be felt down the road." Similarly, Les Brownlee, acting secretary of the Army, worried that DOD might have to wait "some three to six months after these units return" to judge the impact. The effect might take even longer for retentions, since "stop-loss" remains in effect for some Army active duty soldiers and many Army Reserve soldiers.

A growing economy, by providing more employment alternatives, could discourage new enlistments. And the longer the Afghanistan and Iraq occupations continue, the more likely problems are to arise. Beth Asch of the RAND Corporation explains, "Short deployments actually boost

enlistments and reenlistments.” But “studies show longer deployments can definitely have a negative impact.” Lt. Gen. Blum says that a fall in recruits and reenlistees is “the No. 1 thing in my worry book.”

So all that’s left, in Rep. Rangel’s view, is renewing the draft. Every recent war has sparked proposals for restarting conscription. Rep. Rangel and retiring Sen. Fritz Hollings (D-SC) introduced legislation to establish a system of conscription-based national service. Indeed, when the Selective Service System, apparently innocently, placed a notice on its website recruiting for local and appeal boards, it sparked a flurry of media stories and administration denials. In October 2004 the Republican House ostentatiously rejected Rangel’s bill in an attempt to deflate the rumors.

From a security standpoint, conscription would be foolish. The U.S. military is the finest on earth largely because voluntarism allows the Pentagon to be selective, choosing recruits who are smarter and better educated than their civilian counterparts. Enlistees also are selective; they work to succeed in their chosen career rather than to escape forced service. They serve longer terms and reenlist in higher numbers, increasing the experience and skills of the force.

Since conscription would lower the quality of the U.S. military, advocates of a draft make other arguments. Rangel argues that lower socioeconomic groups “make up the overwhelming majority of our nation’s armed forces, and that, by and large, those of wealth and position are absent from the ranks of ground troops.” Actually, Rangel is wrong. There are fewer children of elites, but the underclass is entirely absent, barred from volunteering.

Virtually no one who lacks a high school diploma or who doesn’t score in the top three of five categories of the Armed Forces Quality Test can join. The U.S. military is overwhelmingly middle class; in fact, the test scores and educational achievements of recruits exceed those of young people generally. African Americans are somewhat overrepresented, but they disproportionately serve in support, not combat, arms. Hispanics are underrepresented.

National Service

Broader national service makes even less sense. It would divert people from military service to civilian tasks, jail young men and women who prefer not to put their lives at the discretion of political officials, and waste people’s lives in frivolous, pork-barrel pursuits. How can one compare picking up cigarette butts in a park with patrolling the streets of Baghdad?

Although a volunteer military beats a draft force, Washington risks driving down recruiting and retention, which, over the long term, could wreck the AVF. If forced to choose between a policy of promiscuous military intervention and freedom, an activist administration, whether Republican or Democratic, might turn to a draft. Argues *Washington Times* editorial page editor Tony Blankley, it is critical to increase the size of the military, “whether by draft or by voluntary means.”

Ironically, Blankley recognizes the fact that voluntarism impedes an interventionist foreign policy. Which disproves Rep. Rangel’s final contention, that “there would be more caution” in going to war if policymakers’ children were at risk. The surest barrier to war is not a draft, which allowed the Vietnam War to proceed for years, but the AVF, which empowers average people to say no.

A related argument by *Washington Post* columnist David Broder is that a draft would ensure that more leaders served in the military. But conscription would not increase the incidence of military service, which was low throughout American history until World War II and the Cold War. With new accessions running only about 185,000 a year, the armed services require fewer than 10 percent of male 18-year-olds, and 5 percent of all 18-year-olds, irrespective of how the military is manned.

Ironically, while some legislators advocate renewing conscription, other nations—France, Germany, and Russia, for instance—have moved or are moving to professionalize their forces. In a world where terrorism is a greater threat than a mass attack by the Red Army through Germany’s Fulda Gap, the United States has no choice but to build the sort of quality force possible only through voluntarism. Indeed, Congress should eliminate draft registration—the list ages rapidly and a postmobilization sign-up would be available in an emergency—and close down the Selective Service System, an expensive and unnecessary anachronism.

Improve Retention and Recruiting

What to do to strengthen the armed services? The obvious place to start is improved pay and benefits, especially for Guard and Reserve members, who are increasingly being treated like active duty soldiers. For instance, Democratic legislators have proposed extending health insurance for National Guard and Reserve members even when they are not deployed.

Improved treatment of those deployed overseas, particularly in battle zones, also matters. In September 2003 the Pentagon began the first rest and recuperation leave program since Vietnam, allowing soldiers 15 days

at home. Congress also approved legislation to pay for the flights from Baltimore (where military flights land) to service members' hometowns.

Resources also need to be put into recruiting. In fact, so far the Pentagon has helped stanch potential personnel losses by increasing signing bonuses, doubling the advertising budget, and developing cyberrecruiting.

Personnel Mix

The armed services could use uniformed personnel more efficiently. Explained Secretary Rumsfeld, "We can get some possibly 300,000 people, military people, who are doing non-military jobs out of those non-military jobs and into military positions." The strategy is sound, though civilian functions in war zones cannot always be easily categorized and civilians do not come cheap.

DOD needs to rethink the mix of duties within services as well as shift some billets between active and Reserve forces. As Acting Army Chief of Staff Gen. John Keane has observed: "We need more infantry. We need more military police. We need more civil affairs [personnel]."

Another creative approach, which runs against military tradition, is to bring in trained personnel laterally. The demand for civil affairs personnel, technology experts, and translators, for instance, varies by conflict.

DOD also should consider establishing a multitiered Reserve force, with some units available for longer-term deployments, others for temporary emergencies, and a number for homeland duties. CBO suggests creating temporary "constabulary" units made up of members of the Individual Ready Reserve and people who recently left active or Reserve or Guard service, which could train for six months, deploy for one year, and then disband. Moreover, the military could offer higher compensation for reservists willing to accept more frequent deployment. In fact, the Navy uses assignment and sea pay, and the Army offers stationing pay, to encourage personnel to accept undesirable jobs and locations. Larger reenlistment bonuses also are employed for some hard-to-fill specialties.

Eliminate Unnecessary Military Commitments

Most important, the United States should drop unnecessary commitments. As part of the Pentagon's review of America's strategic posture, President George W. Bush proposed redeploying 60,000 to 70,000 soldiers from Asia and Europe. That is a good start, but far more could be done.

The first priority should be to expeditiously exit Iraq. Lawrence Korb of the Center for American Progress cites Gen. Maxwell Taylor, who observed that we went to Vietnam to save the country but had to withdraw from Vietnam to save the Army. Plans to turn authority over to Iraqis are welcome and reflect the administration's realization that, as one unnamed official put it, "the Iraqis won't tolerate us staying in power for that long." However, the administration plans an indefinite military occupation.

The administration must recognize—even if it doesn't publicly acknowledge—its mistake in invading and occupying Iraq. This is not the first time that an administration has intervened militarily in potentially disastrous civil wars and irregular conflicts. But, as Korb points out, in the cases of Lebanon and Somalia, "the Presidents admitted their mistakes and withdrew the military before more problems were created for the military and the country." Better to accept the prospect of Iraqi instability with equanimity and focus on preventing the accumulation of weapons of mass destruction and cooperation with terrorists.

The U.S. military won the Cold War, defeated a host of small states with minimal casualties, and could overwhelm any nation. But it cannot do everything. Worries Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution, "It would be the supreme irony, and a national tragedy, if after winning two wars in two years, the U.S. Army were broken and defeated while trying to keep the peace." Conscription is no answer; fiddling with military compensation and force structure would help but would not address the basic problem. Only abandoning a foreign policy of empire will eliminate pressure to create an imperial military.

Suggested Readings

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