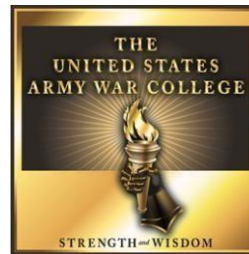


# Redesigning the All-Volunteer Force

by

Colonel Michael Runey  
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United States Army War College  
Class of 2015

DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT: A

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**REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE**

Form Approved--OMB No. 0704-0188

The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing the burden, to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. **PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.**

<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> 01-04-2015		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT		<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b>	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> Redesigning the All-Volunteer Force				<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b>	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b> Colonel Michael Runey United States Army				<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b>	
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> Professor Charles Allen Department of Command, Leadership, and Management				<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b>	
<b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> U.S. Army War College, 122 Forbes Avenue, Carlisle, PA 17013				<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b>	
				<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b>	
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Distribution A: Approved for Public Release. Distribution is Unlimited.					
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> Word Count: 5886					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> America's modern All-Volunteer Force (AVF) just celebrated its fortieth anniversary. Yet the last fourteen years of war put unprecedented demands on the AVF, pushing the enlisted force in the Army in particular nearly to the breaking point. As the military faces new global threats, America's youth head off to college at historically high rates funded in large measure by federal aid. The AVF's long-term viability as a high-quality, affordable, professional volunteer force is increasingly at risk. Acquiring enlisted talent is increasingly challenging for the services, especially the Army. This research study uses an operational design approach from Joint Doctrine to scan the environment, reframe the strategic problem, and propose an approach to aid law and policy makers in sustaining the long-term viability of the AVF. Accounting for the inherent tensions between the key AVF stakeholders—the military, society—recommendations include fostering a national culture of service, realigning incentives to motivate qualified men and women, developing a talent-vetting system to qualify more people, and continuing to compete for and enlist highly qualified young Americans.					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b> Civil-Military Relations, AVF, Operational Design, Society, Military Benefits, GI Bill, Recruiting					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b> 38	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b>
<b>a. REPORT</b> UU	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b> UU	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b> UU			<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (w/ area code)</b>



USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**Redesigning the All-Volunteer Force**

by

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## **Abstract**

Title: Redesigning the All-Volunteer Force

Report Date: 01 April 2015

Page Count: 38

Word Count: 5886

Key Terms: Civil-Military Relations, AVF, Operational Design, Society, Military Benefits, GI Bill, Recruiting

Classification: Unclassified

America's modern All-Volunteer Force (AVF) just celebrated its fortieth anniversary. Yet the last fourteen years of war put unprecedented demands on the AVF, pushing the enlisted force in the Army in particular nearly to the breaking point. As the military faces new global threats, America's youth head off to college at historically high rates funded in large measure by federal aid. The AVF's long-term viability as a high-quality, affordable, professional volunteer force is increasingly at risk. Acquiring enlisted talent is increasingly challenging for the services, especially the Army. This research study uses an operational design approach from Joint Doctrine to scan the environment, reframe the strategic problem, and propose an approach to aid law and policy makers in sustaining the long-term viability of the AVF. Accounting for the inherent tensions between the key AVF stakeholders—the military, society—recommendations include fostering a national culture of service, realigning incentives to motivate qualified men and women, developing a talent-vetting system to qualify more people, and continuing to compete for and enlist highly qualified young Americans.





## Redesigning the All-Volunteer Force

I look forward to working in partnership with Congress and the American people on a sensible approach that ... puts the all-volunteer force on a viable path for the future.

—General Martin Dempsey<sup>1</sup>

### The AVF's Questionable Viability: Gaining Attention

On November 20, 2014, Michèle Flournoy, chief executive of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) announced the start of a two-year line of research on the future civil-military relations and All-Volunteer Force (AVF). Her keynote speaker was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) General Martin Dempsey. In her introductory remarks Ms. Flournoy staked out CNAS's research aims: to frame the key issues, elevate the debate, and present recommendations to the Department of Defense (DOD) and Congress on how to best recruit, develop, retain, and afford the future AVF. The initiative's import only increases considering Ms. Flournoy's experience as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy from 2009 to 2012. Few are as well-versed in the strategic challenges of raising and sustaining a top-quality military.<sup>2</sup> Emphasizing the strains caused by thirteen years of high-tempo deployments, she stated that even with warnings of breaking the AVF, it proved resilient. "But that resilience is not something we should take for granted," she cautioned. Looking to the future, Ms. Flournoy remarked, "It's worth reflecting on lessons we should learn from the past thirteen years and whether the *design* [emphasis added] of the All-Volunteer Force needs to be rethought in some ways."<sup>3</sup>

Ms. Flournoy and CNAS are not alone in assessing the AVF's future, but they are well in front of others. For several years the think-tank community has circled around

this issue. Retired Lieutenant General and former Ambassador Karl Eikenberry explored the unmooring of the AVF from its intended role for the Center for Strategic and International Studies in his essay “Reassessing the All-Volunteer Force.”<sup>4</sup> At the Heritage Foundation, James Carafano sounded the clarion: “Save Our All-Volunteer Military.”<sup>5</sup> From the Brookings Institution, Marvin Kalb asked rhetorically, “Back to the Draft?” To which he answered “No,” but suggested that America institute some form of national service.<sup>6</sup> Further delving into think-tanks’ prodigious libraries reveals ample study and broad concern with the AVF’s future. Yet at present, none offer comprehensive analysis of its problems nor recommend viable future action.

The CNAS, then, stands alone exploring the future viability of the AVF. Perhaps that explains why CJCS General Dempsey accepted Ms. Flournoy’s invitation to be keynote speaker. He commended CNAS for getting beyond the crisis of the day and taking on the dual strategic challenges facing the country, stating, “I think the close examination, the reflection, and the discussion [of these issues] . . . is the best defense to ensure we maintain civil-military relations and the All-Volunteer Force.”<sup>7</sup> Ms. Flournoy’s years guiding defense policy will empower CNAS to review the AVF’s design and produce a campaign plan charting a possible future.

Although comprehensive, CNAS’s review does not yet look at the start of the DOD talent pipeline. To redress this gap, this research project focuses on DOD’s enlisted talent acquisition. Commonly referred to as “recruiting,” such a simple and often misunderstood word unnecessarily limits understanding the complex talent acquisition effort sustaining the AVF. The first step is to better understand the talent acquisition environment. This will enable thorough examination of the problems that put the AVF’s

long-term viability increasingly at risk. By concisely articulating the enlisted talent acquisition problem facing DOD, problem solvers can then derive a broad approach to ensure the military can best compete for and attract high-quality, highly motivated young men and women from American society to join its ranks in a fiscally sustainable way.

### Current Views on the Problem

Today policy analysts place the AVF's enlistment problems in one of three bins: the decreasing quality pool of potential recruits; the public's decreasing willingness to serve in the military; or the unsustainable costs of today's volunteer force.

The primary guardian of AVF's quality is the military. Those who value the American military's status as elite professionals place a premium on the quality of enlisted personnel. In the last decade at least fourteen Army War College (USAWC) Strategy Research Projects (SRPs) have explored the recruiting issue. The USAWC student authors agree that officer corps talent is relatively sound; the risk to the AVF is in recruiting the enlisted ranks. Although a few SRPs address the civil-military divide and recommend national service, most authors focus on the dwindling talent available to the military. Their recommendations orbit around getting the military the quality new personnel it requires by improving recruiting efforts. Unfortunately, they provide few practical solutions to fundamental problems.

Those who see the AVF's problems in terms of a civil-military divide recommend increased service requirements and opportunities for United States (U.S.) citizenry. Two distinct approaches are championed by U.S. Representative Charles Rangel and retired General Stanley McChrystal. Both propose different forms of national service. Since 2004, Rangel regularly introduced legislation to reinstate the military draft; it received little support.<sup>8</sup> General McChrystal is leading another effort as head of the Aspen

Institute's Franklin Project. This initiative aims to expand both opportunities and expectations for voluntary national service.<sup>9</sup> These two approaches attempt to resolve a predominantly civil-military problem through service. Rangel's approach abolishes the AVF; McChrystal's makes the AVF a possible subset of broader service.

The third group, including members of DOD and Congress, views the AVF's issues primarily through a fiscal lens. Together their institutions are exploring compensation reform, focusing on DOD healthcare, retirement, and benefits packages.<sup>10</sup> They aim to save the AVF by balancing the need to provide competitive compensation and benefits with the ability to pay for the force.

#### Alternative Environmental Scan: Political, Military, Economic, Social, Infrastructure, Information (PMESII)

These problems are real: the force requires quality enlistees; a civil-military divide does exist; fiscally the AVF is unsustainable. But such issues are interrelated, and any approach unable to link different parts of the problem will fail to address the root, systemic issues putting the AVF's future at risk. Only by broad environmental scanning can researchers see these intersections of the problem. Joint Doctrine provides PMESII as a construct to determine such interrelationships.<sup>11</sup> Although all factors of PMESII influence the viability of the AVF, two are most relevant and are most interrelated: military and social.

# Diverging Tensions on the AVF

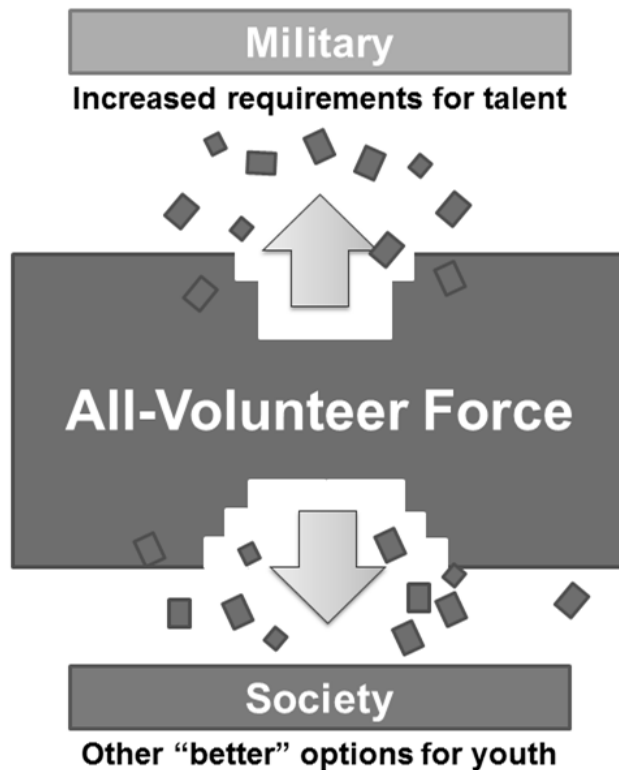


Figure 1. Diverging Tensions on the AVF<sup>12</sup>

## Military Challenges: Balancing Quantity and Quality of its New Talent

To sustain its strength, the American military requires a steady and sufficient flow of fully qualified volunteers to join the ranks. Congress determines sufficiency by mandating end strength.<sup>13</sup> It also establishes through law the minimum quality standards the military can accept in an enlisted recruit.<sup>14</sup> DOD has long managed this quantity-quality tension with two tools: incentives (for both acquiring and retaining talent) and policy. In difficult recruiting environments or when trying to grow the enlisted ranks, DOD modifies policy to ease quality requirements within the limits of the law. When the recruiting environment improves or when the force needs to get smaller, DOD then tightens quality standards. DOD manages some policy decisions but delegates most to

the services. The services then shape their enlisted forces depending on talent requirements to accomplish their service-specific roles, missions, and functions.

Historically, the Army has the greatest talent acquisition challenge. The future appears to be no different. Because the Army has both the largest enlisted recruiting mission and has shown the earliest indicators of mission stress, the Army is DOD's "canary in the coal mine," it is the first service to indicate recruiting problems across the AVF. Notably, in fiscal year 2015, the Army canary stopped singing—the AVF's fundamental enlisted talent acquisition mechanisms are fracturing under the diverging strains of the demands imposed by the military and society.

In the past, when faced with similar downturns in recruiting, DOD simply adjusted accession policy toward the legal lowest quality limit. If those steps proved insufficient, the Pentagon requested increased funding for recruiting incentives. But broader and deeper examination of the environment indicates that in 2015 and beyond no combination of policy loosening or incentive increases will solve the longer-term, systemic problems in acquiring talent the military, and the Army specifically, requires.<sup>15</sup>

### Quantity

With the decrease in operational mission requirements, military end-strength has been declining since 2013. Despite this drawdown, the military—specifically the Army—faces significant challenges recruiting the quantity of men and women it requires in the enlisted force. When compared to the Cold War era, today's manpower requirements are relatively low. Consider that in 1980, the Army aimed to recruit 172,800 men and women for active duty to support an active Army strength of 776,536, well within the range of the prior five years.<sup>16</sup> Army end-strength remained relatively stable, above

## 2014 Military Enlistments by Branch

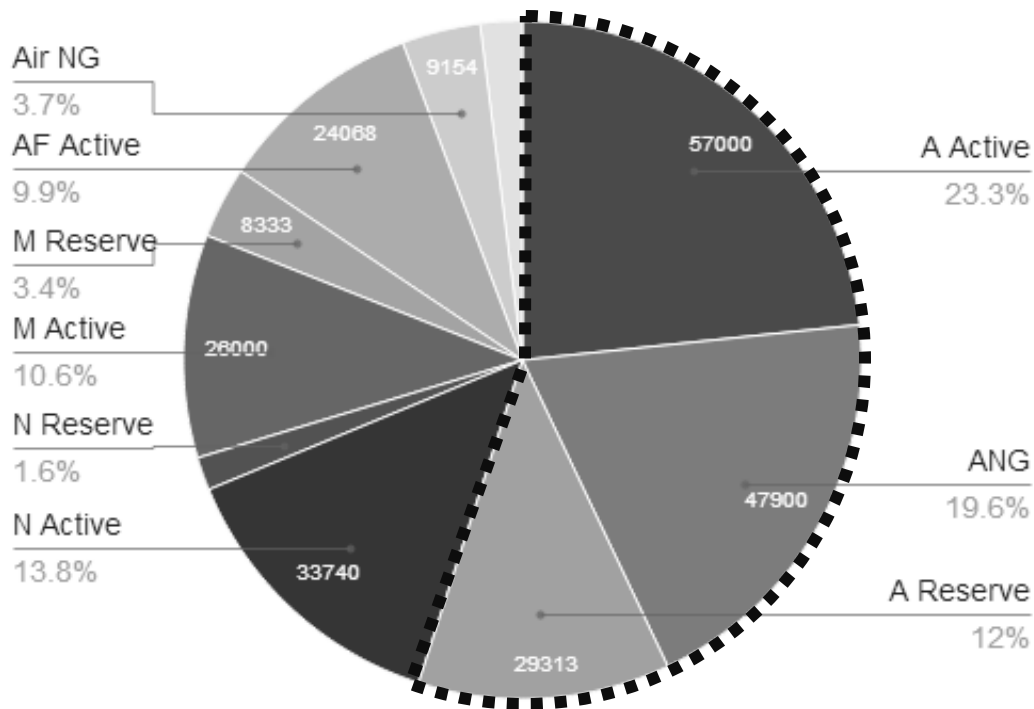


Figure 2. DOD 2014 Enlistment Breakdown: Service and Component<sup>17</sup>

700,000, through the Cold War, and then dropped in 1999-2001 to 480,000. Despite the force reduction, the Army struggled to recruit in the 1990s, missing targets in 1990 and 1999; its annual requirements ranged between seventy-five and ninety thousand enlistees. After 9/11, the Army grew again, peaking in 2010 at 570,000. Yet the Army again struggled, especially in 2005. Looking to the future, the Army is set to drawdown again in 2015 to 480,000, possibly dropping as low as 420,000.<sup>18</sup> Even with a relatively small force and a commensurate decrease in enlistment requirements, the Army has been struggling to meet recruiting number even with an increasing U.S. population. Two factors are driving this current drawdown: the projected completion of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and the fiscal constraints imposed by the Budget Control Act of 2011.

Table 1. Active Army End-Strength and Recruiting Missions<sup>19</sup>  
*(Numbers in parentheses are achieved enlistments)*

<b>US Army</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2015</b>
Active End Strength	776,536 <sup>20</sup>	732,000	480,000	502,400	480,000
Recruiting Mission: Active	172,800	87,000 (89,617)	74,500 (68,210)	80,000 (73,255)	60,000

Despite the decreasing demand for new enlisted talent, a reduced combat role, and a poor economy, the Army failed in two key talent acquisition areas. In 2014, the Army fell short of its National Guard and Reserve goals, reaching 98.3 percent and 91.6 percent respectively.<sup>21</sup> Significantly, this was the second year in a row the Army missed its Reserve and National Guard missions.<sup>22</sup>

The Army active component is having trouble, too. A key marker signaling active duty enlistment success is the number of enlistees entering active duty through the Delayed Entry Program (DEP). The DEP enables an individual to enlist but delay shipping to basic training, typically to finish high school. Importantly for the Army, the DEP enables effective planning for basic and special skills training, injecting the newly recruited talent into the force at the right time. According to Major General Thomas Seamands, the Army's Director, Military Personnel Management, in 2013 the number in the DEP had dropped significantly: "If you were to go back in time about a year ago, we would have had almost half our mission in the delayed entry program. If you look at it now, it's about a third."<sup>23</sup> Through 2014 and into 2015, US Army Recruiting Command saw that number decrease, despite major efforts at reversing the slide. Forecasts through fiscal year 2015 and out to 2016 show a high potential for even a smaller number in the DEP. When the DEP gets too low for too long, the Army risks missing its



end strength target. Indicators show this increasingly likely as the underlying, diverging tensions between society and the military shape the AVF's talent acquisition efforts.

To date only the Army's recruiting is missing the mark, but all of the services are on record anticipating a tougher recruiting environment. Recently key leaders signaled emerging challenges in enlisted talent acquisition. The Army representative, Major General Thomas Seamands, stated, ". . . recruiting is expected to become increasingly more difficult due to [the] tough recruiting environment and the impacts of the budget."<sup>24</sup> Navy Rear Admiral Annie Andrews testified of competing more with private sector career opportunities, and although quality of its recruits remained very high, their test scores were declining. She stated, "We will continue to recruit the best and most qualified youths in the Nation to meet current and emerging requirements while tackling the challenges of an increasingly competitive marketplace and an improving economy."<sup>25</sup> The Air Force, which historically has few challenges recruiting, most clearly outlined the growing problem. Brigadier General Gina Grosso explained,

We recognize the trend [of recruiting very high quality Airmen] will be unsustainable as the economy continues to improve and competition to draw recruits from the small, qualified talent pool, who are alarmingly less inclined to choose military service as a career, increases dramatically.<sup>26</sup>

Such consistent and candid communication of risk from the largest services is rare in a public forum. Traditionally, when DOD sees such a broad-based challenge in the recruiting environment that standard policy adjustments cannot fix, it asks Congress for increased funding for enlistment bonuses. For perspective, between 2000 and 2008 Congress doubled enlistment bonuses across DOD to \$625 million.<sup>27</sup> Despite this increase, the Army still failed its active duty recruiting mission in 2005; the other services proved successful. Today, Congress and DOD are well aware of fiscal

limitations imposed by the Budget Control Act of 2011 and the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013. No room exists in the DOD-Congressional budget dialogue for enlistment bonuses. Another more drastic and untested option for DOD is to radically relax enlistee quality standards, up to the legal limit. Yet solving the quantity problem in this way simply creates another dilemma in quality.

### Quality

DOD and the services have and continue to assess the quality of potential recruits in four basic ways: a high school degree, mental aptitude, moral track record, and physical health. The high school degree is especially valued as a measure of enlistee quality, firmly ensconced in DOD accessions policy; it is also verified and reliable marker for successful completion of a recruit's first term of enlistment. Increasingly the high school diploma is being considered as one component of an individual's "grit," a broader descriptor of resilience valued by both the military and society.<sup>28</sup>

The high school diploma's rise as the sine qua non of quality is remarkable. In 1980, of the Army's 172,800 recruits, only 85,825 were high school graduates—49.6 percent.<sup>29</sup> By 2014, 98 percent of the Army's and 99 percent of the other services' recruits held a high school degree. Yet this rise in quality was far from uniform, and may be unsustainable. When pressed with a tough recruiting environment, the Army has been forced accept fewer high school graduates than it desired, ranging from 79 percent to 87 percent between 2005 and 2008. In perspective, DOD averages over the same period remained above 90 percent, with the Navy dipping to 93 percent only once. The Marines and Air Force typically held in the 98-99 percent range.<sup>30</sup> The high school

degree is a readily understandable and desired quality marker, though DOD sacrifices it in tough times.

Another less understood enlisted quality assessment tool is the military's mental aptitude test.<sup>31</sup> The test separates candidates' scores into three broad categories. By DOD policy, the services' benchmark is to recruit 60 percent in the top tier, and no more than 4 percent in the bottom tier.<sup>32</sup> As with high school graduates, it is the Army that has most recently had the lowest scoring enlistees and most closely pressed against the boundaries of DOD benchmarks. Although the other services have seen variances, none has come as close to the DOD policy limits as the Army has.<sup>33</sup>

#### The Emerging Quantity+Quality Problem

The challenge for the services is how to maintain the balance between quantity and quality. The normal course in a tough recruiting environment is to enlist to the minimum DOD policy standards. This provides the best opportunity to meet the quantity the services require, but puts the quality of the force at increased, albeit acceptable, risk. Because of its relatively large size, the Army is most challenged managing the quantity-quality tension. The largest service, already reducing its end-strength more than any other, and has shown it is struggling to enlist the talent under current policy limits. Yet, in a logical but unanticipated turn, the Army is contemplating increasing its quality requirements for new recruits.

The Army's 2014 Operating Concept, "Winning in a Complex World: 2020-2040," describes the multiple dilemmas facing ground combatants in the future. Two of the five identified characteristics of the future operational environment place an increased demand on Soldiers, including increased velocity of human interaction and events and operations among populations in complex terrain.<sup>34</sup> To operate in such environments,

Army leadership has signaled to its recruiters that the Army requires smarter, culturally attuned, and more morally resilient young men and women. The Army's 2014 Human Dimension Concept went further, indicating for the first time that current standards of quality are no longer sufficient. The future environment will require future soldiers to possess enhanced capabilities:

Faced with a complex future OE [operating environment], changing fiscal realities, and continuous engagement as part of unified land operations, *the Army will require enhanced capabilities in the cognitive, physical, and social components of the human dimension.* These capabilities are necessary for the future Army to win the clash of wills, become more expeditionary while retaining capability, and maintain overmatch over adversaries.<sup>35</sup>

The Army's faces a predicament. To succeed in future conflicts it requires higher quality forces. Yet it is struggling to acquire both the quantity and the quality under current, less rigorous standards. By stating future soldiers require "enhanced capabilities," mental and physical, the Army is demanding even better talent from a talent pool already strained to yield today's quality demands. By staking claim to a new "social" component, the Army has upped the quality ante in a way no other service has in history. While the Army has yet to define these new capabilities and develop the tools to assess them, the point is clear: to win in the complex, future environment, today's quality standards are insufficient for tomorrow's Army.

The quantity-quality tension will be hard enough to manage by itself, but the Army's increasing demand for "enhanced capabilities" puts the long-term viability of the AVF at higher risk than it is today. Few have made this connection. Risk increases even more when one studies the state of the talent pool available from American society.

## Societal Challenges: Drying up the AVF's Talent Pool

America wants not only capable men and women to join the military, it requires highly motivated volunteers. Americans' regard for their service members continues to be strong relative to other professions; they place military service at the top.<sup>36</sup> Despite such widespread, sustained respect, the desire to serve among young people of military age, 18-24, has slowly but steadily declined.<sup>37</sup> One reason for this apparent contradiction rests with American society and its promotion of other viable opportunities to young adults. With new, less demanding options, many American youth who otherwise may have explored or sought military service do not have to. Today's potential volunteers simply have other good options than military service, from college enabled by school loans to a wave of cooperative work/school options near home. Society—schools, industry, and commerce—recognizes the same potential as DOD does in these young people and is better able to compete for it.

The society-wide demand for talent is increasing, and the trend is to identify and recruit to potential, not competency. In a 2014 article "21<sup>st</sup> Century Talent Spotting," Claudio Fernández-Aráoz highlights this global demand for high-quality talent. He recommends companies focus on key aspects of potential, including a person's motivation, determination, and curiosity.<sup>38</sup> Although Fernández-Aráoz focuses on executive leadership, the military should draw two key conclusions. First, the talent market at all levels is tightening. Second, because the military's talent pipeline begins with the potential of its entry-level members, the senior leaders of 2035 will be competed for in the talent market next year. DOD's talent acquisition model wholly depends on assumed potential; it has no proven ways to both assess and then win it.

The military cannot wait to develop better talent spotting tools. In the near term DOD leaders must address at least three key factors in American society drawing young people away from military service. First, fewer and fewer Americans are eligible to serve because they do not meet current moral, physical, or mental qualifications. Second, fewer want to serve, and even more are opposed to mandatory service. Finally, young people perceive that they have other good options that were less available to their parents, specifically college, which diminishes the attractiveness of military service.

### Decreasing Eligibility to Serve

That an ever-decreasing number of Americans are eligible to serve in the military is perhaps the most widely accepted problem facing the AVF. In 1980, at the height of the AVF's early recruiting challenges, 55 of 100 young men qualified to serve.<sup>39</sup> Today that number has dropped to 29 of 100 of both men and women.<sup>40</sup> Obesity is a major problem that shows no signs of improving, despite efforts by groups such as Mission Readiness.<sup>41</sup> Although obesity has garnered much attention, the moral factor is increasingly a problem. Consider that by age 23, four of ten men and one in five women have been arrested. Just over half of these received convictions. But to enlist in the military, DOD looks not only at convictions but also at arrest records.

A decade's long emphasis across America on law and order, combined with increased interconnectedness of criminal databases, has led to an increasing number of potential military applicants who a decade ago would have had a much easier time enlisting. The military uses processes to screen those with arrest records and even convictions, allowing some to enlist in certain conditions; the waiver process exists. But the full impact of the America's law and order efforts combined with the power of the internet means that more of the population either cannot serve due to interactions with

law enforcement or they must wade through a prolonged application process. In the meantime, these otherwise talented young people are being recruited by colleges and employers.<sup>42</sup> While sidelining more potential talent than ever before, the long waiver process could be a factor driving this generation's desire to serve to historical lows.

### Decreasing Desire to Serve

Despite the military's continued status as the highest regarded among other professions, young Americans in particular keep the military at arm's length.<sup>43</sup> Today, according to the DOD's survey of the American youth, only 12 percent of young adults 18-24 desire to serve in the military.<sup>44</sup> The slide to this depth is long. In the 1980s the propensity to serve was about 25 percent. By the late 1990s it dropped below 20 percent, and by 2006 it was under 15 percent.<sup>45</sup> Today's young adults largely do not want to serve in America's military, despite the fact they, their parents, and grandparents hold the American military in high regard. Besides an increasingly complex qualification process, why this split?

Perhaps a major source of the propensity problem is the American society's lack of trust in how civilian leaders—recent presidents in particular—have employed the military. Several key soldier-scholars, including Andrew Bacevich, explore this aspect.

In Bacevich's most recent book, *Breach of Trust*, he argues:

In their disgust over Vietnam, Americans withdrew from [the arrangement that wars require popular consent]. They disengaged from war, with few observers giving serious consideration to the implications of doing so. Events since, especially events since 9/11, have made those implications manifest. In the United States, war no longer qualifies in any meaningful sense as the people's business. In military matters, Americans have largely forfeited their say.<sup>46</sup>

Despite forfeiting their say, the people are not mute on the issue. Americans' unwillingness to enlist is active speech; their dissatisfaction with a system that enables

the president to employ, at his sole discretion, military forces abroad is evidenced in this high respect-low propensity divergence. The vast majority continue to support the troops, yet ever fewer are willing to join them.

Today's international tensions and the partisanship in American national politics fuels citizen's distrust of those charged with deploying troops overseas. This reticence translates to fewer adults recommending military service to young people, which only adds pressure to an increasingly stressed All-Volunteer Force that deploys and redeploys. As the few who join the military go to training and ship off to deployment, a greater number of America's youth go off to school in ever-increasing numbers, enticed by federal funding offered for nothing more expected in return except their loan repayment. As good as the educational benefits have been in exchange for military service, the Congress and recent presidents have made the non-military path to college much easier and desirable, and more and more young adults are taking it.

#### Decreasing Value of Service.

Even with the increased value of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, the educational value of military service has been decreasing for years. Federal financial aid for college, more than any other factor, undercuts benefits resulting from military service. Historically the GI Bill's value has been a key talent attraction among the graduating high school cohort.<sup>47</sup> Especially true a generation ago, today it is losing its luster. Consider that in 1980 only 49 percent of high school graduates attended college within a year of leaving high school. To that era's youth, the 1984 revitalization of the GI Bill filled a significant need in society when college was out of reach for most. But today many more are finding their way to school, although far fewer are taking advantage of the military's GI Bill. In 2001, over 10 million of the nation's 28 million 18-24 year olds were in a two- or



four-year college program (36 percent). By 2011, that figure climbed to over 13 million of 31.1 million (42 percent).<sup>48</sup> By 2023, the AVF's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, college enrollment is expected to climb to 20.2 million, while the overall population remains unchanged.<sup>49</sup> Two of three of those eligible to serve will be in college.

How do young people pay for college, though? Ironically, the federal government's increasing financial commitment to fund college is undercutting the military's ability to compete in this talent market. In 2003, federal grants and tax benefits covered 55 percent of tuitions and fees for those at public 4-year schools. By 2012-13 federal aid climbed to 63 percent, even factoring for tuition inflation across the decade.<sup>50</sup> Both Presidents Bush and Obama directed actions to improve affordability and increase aid for higher education, arguing a college degree best prepared young people for the job market.<sup>51</sup> Notably, neither chief executive promoted enlisting in the armed forces. Most recently, President Obama proposed free community college for responsible students.<sup>52</sup> The message is clear: Uncle Sam expects young people to get a college degree, and he is going foot a good part of the bill, no service or obligation required.

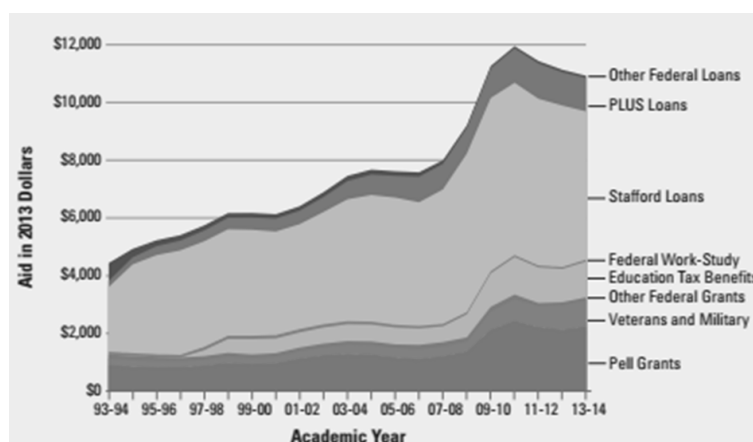


Figure 3. Federal Student Aid per Full-Time Student in 2013 Dollars, (1993-2013)<sup>53</sup>

Despite this explosion in federal aid (Figure 3), college is still costing parents and students more than ever. Over the last decade college expenses have increased more than \$2,000 per year (in 2012 dollars). Loans, cheap and highly accessible, have helped young people bridge the gap.<sup>54</sup> By 2014 such easily accessible money led to a college graduate's average debt climbing to an inflation-adjusted record of \$33,000, up from \$24,000 a decade earlier.<sup>55</sup>

Although historic, such a debt-load for an individual appears manageable considering the alternative: enlist in the military for three years before being able to cash in on the GI Bill. Another perspective is that while the GI Bill offers four years of education after three years of service, the federal government's current system (grants, student aid) combined with other funding sources already covers three years of college. According to the College Board, the average cost of college (tuition, room, board, fees) at an out-of-state public school in 2015 was \$32,762, nearly equivalent to the average \$33,000 student debt load.<sup>56</sup> Side by side with federal aid and other sources of funding, the GI Bill's added benefit equates to only one year of college, its drawbacks are deferred college attendance and the inherent costs of military life. In simple monetary terms, college aid programs have undercut the GI Bill's face value by nearly 75 percent.<sup>57</sup> That such staggering numbers are attending college and bypassing enlistment, is in part, because a federal initiative (college education) and program (student aid) have undercut national military service

This is more than a college-military decision, though. Consider the value proposition of becoming a private in any military branch compared to college. By voluntarily enlisting, one surrenders personal freedom and independent identity, submits

to strict rules that govern nearly every aspect of one's life, and takes on added responsibility few seek out. Such a lifestyle appeals to some, and despite having other good options they enlist serve well. But not enough of these type of highly qualified-highly motivated youth enlist. Those who could serve but do not make their decision in a society that often encourages college as the first option. More and more are taking that course.

### Redefining the Problem

Today America's military is a professional, world-class, highly recruited, volunteer organization, widely respected by its society. Its youngest members are highly compensated relative to other Americans their age. But the combination of the military, social, and political factors in the strategic environment leads one to conclude that the AVF cannot survive without fundamental redesign. Congress has no stomach for enlistment bonuses, nor has the President requested them. Policy shifts by DOD can provide limited help recruiting quantity, but immediately undercut quality of the force. For the AVF's long-term viability, the military, political leaders, and the American people must address the underlying problem: the military cannot satisfy its demand for increasingly more qualified enlistees due to societal factors that enlistment policy adjustments and increases to compensation, benefits, and enlistment incentives can resolve.

Quantifying this problem clarifies the core issues. Of 100 young Americans, only 4 are both qualified and willing to serve. Proportionally, college will draw at least two of these. College, the military and employers vie for the other two; the military needs at least one to enlist. Of the remaining 96, 25 are qualified but unwilling to serve, and 15 are unqualified but willing. Remaining are 56 Americans who are both unwilling and

unable to serve under today's standards.<sup>58</sup> Applying these percentages to the 4 million Americans turning eighteen this year, one gains a far clearer picture of the competition for talent between businesses, colleges, and the military. Pictorially and proportionally the problem looks like this:

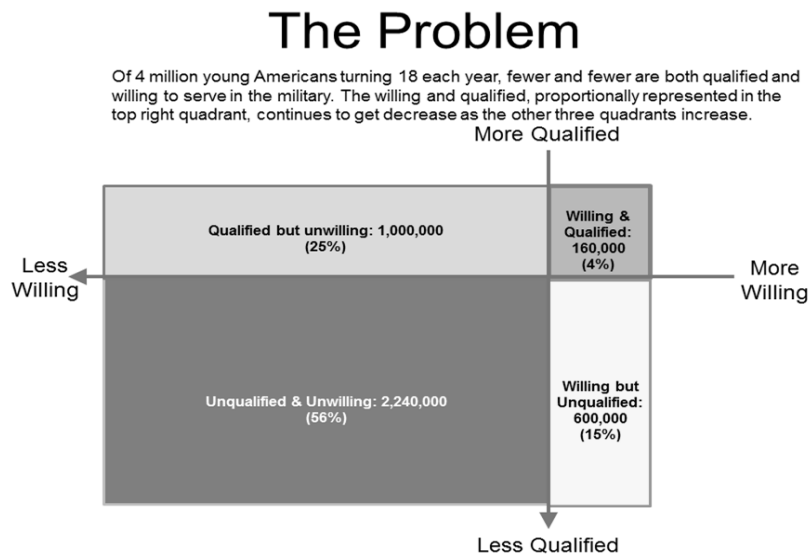


Figure 4. The AVF's Strategic {roblem<sup>59</sup>

But this dynamic situation is trending in the wrong direction for the AVF. On the chart, the long-term movement is toward both decreased willingness and decreased qualification to serve (down and left). As the DOD's demand for highly qualified, motivated young talent continues, competing for talent in the top right quadrant becomes even more challenging. Long-term solutions must address the trends in both quality and quantity, but any redesign of the AVF must account for the deep tensions between the military and social aspects of the problem. Failure to do so threatens any future approach.

## Expanding the Talent Pool of Willing and Qualified: Four Lines of Effort

A redesigned AVF requires a holistic approach aimed at long-term, systemic issues to ensure an accessible talent pool of qualified and willing young adults to serve in the military. Accomplishing this requires decisive change without violating the fundamental interests of two key AVF stakeholders: the military and society. For example, the military will not sacrifice the principle that uniformed recruits be sufficiently intelligent, physically sound and capable, and morally fit for military life and demands. Similarly, the approach should not require society to forego preparing young people for college or other high value opportunities.

Considering each stakeholder's core interests, and accounting for the military and societal factors in the environment, an approach emerges that could renew the AVF's long-term viability. Such an approach should engage each quadrant of the problem diagram.

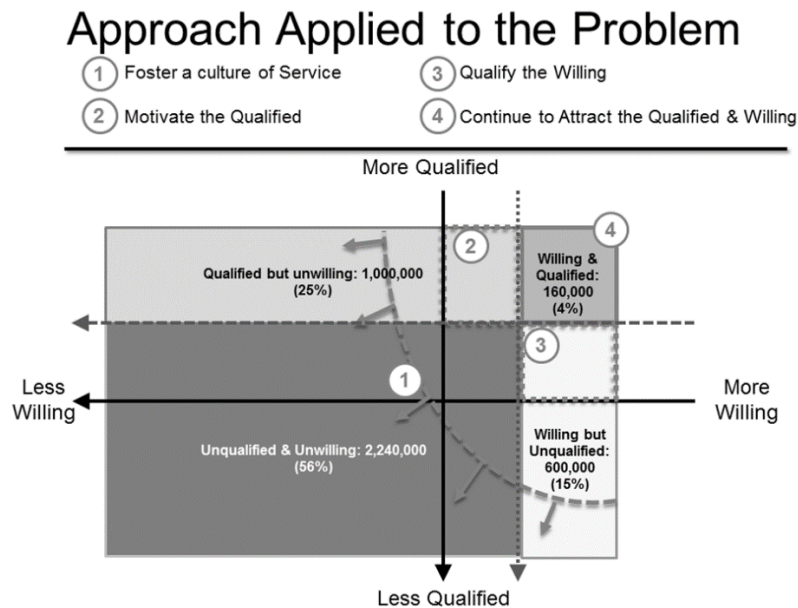


Figure 5. The Approach Applied to the Problem<sup>60</sup>

First, creatively cultivate a culture of voluntary national service that includes as many young people as possible, regardless of willingness or qualification to serve. Second, among those one million eighteen year olds qualified to serve but unwilling (top left), incentivize such service by aligning their desires with national interests, of which a high quality military is one. Third, qualify those willing to serve but today cannot fully qualify (bottom right). Develop a talent spotting and vetting process, akin to what Special Forces employ to identify and select their talent today. The nation's Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps programs have both a history and a mechanism that could such an effort. Fourth, and finally, continue to seek and attract the already high-quality, highly motivated young people the nation seeks today (top right). Many of these young men and women want to serve in the military, and need to be actively recruited.

Together, an approach comprised along these four lines can arrest and then reverse the drift toward fewer and fewer qualified and willing young men and women. By expanding those qualified and willing to serve the nation, both in the military and civilian capacities. In doing so, the AVF's enlisted talent requirements are more likely to receive long-term, sustainable support from both society and the military.

## Conclusion

The divergent military and societal tensions make the AVF's future viability untenable without fundamental change. Although America likes its volunteer military, the military is driving it to be of even higher quality even as society is showing it will not sustain the military's steady call for volunteers. To be sure, many dedicated and experienced leaders in DOD, Congress, and across society have and will continue to

support the AVF. But few realistically acknowledge the degree and power these tensions place on the All-Volunteer Forces foundational structures.

The CNAS's commitment to review the AVF holistically is an essential start, but its inattention thus far to enlisted talent acquisition risks reaching conclusions without addressing the force's fundamental issues. This research starts to address this gap. Further analysis must include integrating the political interrelationships with both the military and society, with special focus on fiscal issues such as pay and compensation. It is the political leadership who is charged with managing these tensions and forging solutions from what is possible. In developing a more complete approach to the AVF's enlisted talent acquisition, future efforts must develop methods acceptable to key stakeholders, assign responsibility, propose objectives, and develop basic assessment tools to monitor the AVF's viability and account for changes in the broad system.

The AVF's problems are real, complex, and interrelated. Redesigning the future AVF must begin at the beginning: with the young men and women who join the ranks. Everyone involved with DOD talent acquisition effort must pitch in: military, societal, and political leaders. Ms. Flournoy's call for a redesign of "America's All-Volunteer Force" is timely; the very life of today's high quality AVF is at stake. Time is not our ally. America needs a concerted, whole-of-country approach to successfully complete a reform of the AVF that fixes the pervasive problems, especially with enlisted talent acquisition, without killing what makes it so venerated and potent today. Those undertaking this task should gain encouragement in this: Americans can agree they want their All-Volunteer Force, and they want it healthy and good and strong for the long haul. For the AVF's redesign, that is a good principle to build on.

## Endnotes

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<sup>14</sup> “US Code, Title 10, Chapter 31-Enlistments,” Sections 501-520c, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/subtitle-A/part-II/chapter-31> (accessed March 11, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> US Army Recruiting Command’s Commander’s Initiatives Group, email message to author, January 23, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> That Army recruiting mission ranged from a high in 1975 at 204,600 to a low in 1978 of 137,000 US Army. Recruiting Command, “USAREC State of Command Brief—End FY80,” Thurman Papers collection, Army Heritage and Experience Center Archives, 6-7.

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<sup>18</sup> Officer of the Undersecretary of Defense (Comptroller), *United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2016 Budget Request: Overview* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, February 2015), 2-3.

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<sup>20</sup> Department of the Army, “Department of the Army Historical Summary: FY 1980: Manning,” <http://www.history.army.mil/books/DAHSUM/1980/ch05.htm> (accessed February 26, 2015), 75.

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<sup>27</sup> Miriam Jordan, "Recruits' Ineligibility Tests the Military," *Wall Street Journal Online*, June 27, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/recruits-ineligibility-tests-the-military-1403909945> (accessed February 27, 2015).

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<sup>29</sup> US Army Recruiting Command, "USAREC State of Command Brief—End FY80," Thurman Papers collection, Carlisle Barracks, PA, Army Heritage and Experience Center Archives, 6-7.

<sup>30</sup> Department of Defense, "Recruit Quality Over Time," <http://prhome.defense.gov/Portals/52/Documents/RFM/MPP/Accession%20Policy/docs/Quality%20by%20FY%20from%201973.pdf> (accessed February, 27 2015).

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<sup>37</sup> Stephen M. Kosiak, *Military Manpower for the Long Haul* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, October 15, 2008), 33.

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<sup>52</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, White House, “FACT SHEET - White House Unveils America’s College Promise Proposal: Tuition-Free Community College for Responsible Students,” <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/09/fact-sheet-white-house-unveils-america-s-college-promise-proposal-tuition> (accessed February 3, 2015).

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<sup>58</sup> These calculations are based on the previously cited figures: 71 percent of young American adults unqualified to serve; 15 percent are willing to serve; 60 percent of high school graduates go directly to college.

<sup>59</sup> Only 4 percent of young people are both willing and qualified to serve in the military, and that number is declining. How to bring the remaining back in play in the competition for talent?

<sup>60</sup> Any approach must address the complex problem in multiple ways, accounting for each stakeholder's critical interests.

