

Supplying the Manpower That America's National Security Strategy Demands

Blaise Misztal and Jack Rametta¹

Introduction

The first mention of the military in our nation's founding document refers, perhaps not surprisingly, to the authority, vested in Congress, to create an armed force in the first place. Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution imbues the legislative branch with the power to "raise and support Armies." However, the Constitution provides little guidance as to what else Congress should take into account in raising an Army.

Fortunately, George Washington, soon to be our first commander in chief, laid out his vision for the U.S. military. Washington's "Sentiments on a Peace Establishment," written in 1783 three years before he assumed the presidency, might be the first treatise on American strategy.² In it, he of course touches on traditional questions of strategy—what threats the Army must defend against, where it should be positioned, or how large it should be—but Washington delves most deeply into questions related to the *who*, not the *what* or *how*, of military force: how to recruit troops, how long they should serve, the ideal composition of the military and officer corps, criteria for promoting troops, how to determine pay, and even the appropriateness of providing rum in soldiers' rations (vinegar, it turns out, is better).

As this document was meant for the "Commencement of our Military system," Washington argued that this focus on military personnel was necessary because it was "the proper

time to introduce new and beneficial regulations, and to expunge all customs, which from experience have been found unproductive of general good."³ The questions that Washington raises go beyond concerns about an incipient armed force and are critical to the strength of any military, but particularly one that depends, as the U.S. military does, on voluntary service.

Indeed, one could argue that the unrivaled superiority of the American armed forces over the past 70 years can be attributed in large part to the willingness of lawmakers and defense leaders to revisit and revise how servicemembers are recruited, managed, promoted, paid, and retained. The set of laws and policies that manage these functions, known collectively as the defense personnel system, provides the manpower supply—not just in terms of numbers, but also in terms of rank, skills, and specialties—that America's military needs to execute its mission and America's National Security Strategy demands.⁴

Although there is a surprising degree of continuity between the military envisioned by Washington and the one that exists today, the personnel system has evolved significantly over the past two-and-a-quarter centuries, shifting from volunteer militias to conscription and then finally to an all-volunteer standing force, accompanied by the growth of compensation and benefits and the inclusion of women. Many of these changes have been instituted in the past seven decades and reflect

the need to ensure that the force is able to protect American interests as effectively as possible in a changing security environment. The personnel system utilized by today's military, for example, was enshrined in statute shortly after World War II and was updated to address the evolving strategic context of the Cold War.

Given the currently shifting and ambiguous strategic landscape in which threats range from the high end (Russia and China) to the low (non-state actors), and with the military's missions varying from the technological (defending cyberspace) to the personal (security assistance), it might be worth evaluating whether the current personnel system is in need of another update. This sentiment is reflected in the FY 2019 National Defense Authorization Act, which made several statutory changes in the officer promotion system to allow for more flexible military career paths. The questions that should drive such an analysis, U.S. Naval War College Professor Jacquelyn Schneider suggests, include:

- “What does the warrior of the future look like?”
- “What are the roles and missions the United States will need to prepare its people for?”
- “What are the technologies those warriors must master in order to succeed at their mission?”⁵

The greater the variance between the answers to those questions and the servicemembers produced by the current system, the more reform the system might require.

The Evolution of “Up-or-Out”: From World War II to DOPMA

World War II: The Origins of “Up-or-Out.” While the origins of the modern U.S. military and some of the institutional structures can be traced back to the early years of the Republic, most of today's personnel policy emerged from the World Wars and their aftermath. For

example, while conscription has been in use in a variety of different forms since the Revolutionary War,⁶ the modern draft originated in World War I (when the phrase “selective service” was first coined).⁷ And while basic units of the Army (and later the Navy, Air Force, and Marines), such as officers and enlisted personnel, date from well before the colonial era, the function of those components morphed with the evolution of modern military technology and strategies.

Before World War II began, the Army was ill-prepared (from a personnel perspective) for a large-scale conflict: The total number of officers before the war was only 15,000; older senior officers populated the ranks; and there were limited opportunities for new junior officers to proceed up the ladder.⁸ The enlisted force swelled as the United States entered the war, rising from 269,023 in 1940 to 1,462,315 in 1941 to 8,266,373 at its height in 1945.⁹ However, there were not enough experienced officers to lead these new troops effectively. At the time, the Army's promotion system was based on seniority, and Congress retained strict control of the number of officers allowed at each rank. This created a significant logjam for promotions between the two world wars. Then Army Chief of Staff and later Secretary of Defense George Marshall gained President Roosevelt's approval to address the issue by culling the Army's senior ranks in 1940.¹⁰ The following year, Congress passed the Army Vitalization Act of 1941,¹¹ giving Army command further discretion to open senior slots to junior officers for promotion and thereby allowing new officers to be commissioned.

Problems with the seniority system persisted throughout the war because it was nearly impossible to remove officers from the service. Congressional approval was repeatedly required to fix the bloated, aging officer corps. By the end of the war, the Army had more than 385,000 officers,¹² about 19 times more than before the war began. After the war, testifying during hearings on the proposed Officer Personnel Act of 1947, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, then Army Chief of Staff, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that:

I think that no great argument would have to be presented to show that our promotion system [seniority] has been unsatisfactory. Until we got to the grade of general officer, it was absolutely a lock-step promotion; and short of almost crime being committed by an officer, there were ineffectual ways of eliminating a man.¹³

General Eisenhower further explained that:

If you look at General Marshall's difficulties in 1940 and 1941 I believe you will find that of the people he could make division commanders, and corps commanders, and certainly there were not over five of them who went through this war. All the rest of them had to be replaced and gotten out of the way and younger men had to come along and take over the job.

We must keep this corps vital and youthful.¹⁴

Congress heeded Eisenhower's call and allowed for the drastic expansion of the officer corps.

While congressional action was required to clear the Army's logjams, the Navy operated quite differently. Instead of employing a seniority system for promotions, the Navy relied on an *up-or-out* promotion system, which holds that officers must separate from service after a predetermined length of time if they are passed over for promotion.¹⁵ (In the modern force, with few exceptions, officers passed over twice for promotion must separate from service.) Compared to a seniority system, *up-or-out* has several advantages.

- First, and most important, it ensures that junior officers have opportunities to climb the ranks, preventing stalwart senior officers from occupying their posts for indefinite periods of time.
- Second, *up-or-out* is meant to be a meritocratic system that allows talented

servicemembers to steadily climb the ranks, while a system based on seniority merely rewards time in rank.

Given its real and perceived advantages, *up-or-out* was applied uniformly across the services for permanent promotions after World War II with the passage of the Officer Personnel Act (OPA) of 1947. The services still had flexibility for temporary assignments.¹⁶ The OPA also made a series of other policy changes with the goals of providing uniformity between the Army and the Navy, emphasizing "youth and vigor," and creating a force that could remobilize quickly if necessary.¹⁷

The 1954 Officer Grade Limitation Act (OGLA) further solidified *up-or-out* by imposing statutory limitations on the number of regular and reserve officers that could serve at each rank for all grades above major and eliminating the loophole in OPA which did not impose limitations on temporary promotions.¹⁸ The last major change in personnel policy to occur before the end of the draft era in 1973 was the codification of the majority of U.S. military policy into Title X of the U.S. Code after the Korean War. Title X unified most existing permanent statutory military policies, including the OPA and OGLA, under one heading.

At the time, there was widespread agreement among military and civilian experts that *up-or-out* was a significant improvement. It was designed for the specific security environment in which the United States found itself at the time and for the military strategies it devised to manage that environment. World War II and the Korean War required the services to marshal large and bottom-heavy armies that were quickly assembled through the draft: U.S. peak military personnel was 12,209,238 in 1945 as compared with 458,365 in 1940.¹⁹ These conscripted forces needed the steady leadership of experienced, competent, and energetic officers in order to fight and win the large-scale, industrial ground and naval battles that defined this era of war. Policymakers believed that enlisted and junior-officer personnel, brought in through the draft, could be trained quickly for

war but that more experienced commanders needed more time to prepare and could not therefore be recruited swiftly during a crisis. Consequently, the military maintained a much higher percentage of officers than it had previously. “In 1945,” according to the Bipartisan Policy Center, “the military had a ratio of approximately 1.3 field-grade officers for every 100 enlisted personnel. Five years later, the ratio stood at 4 to 100.”²⁰

Moreover, in keeping with the strategic need for officers who could lead fresh recruits into battle, because up-or-out was intended to be meritocratic, the promotion path and criteria created by the post–World War II personnel system emphasized and rewarded the ability to command. Nevertheless:

It is worth noting that even in 1947 some senators objected to the up-or-out personnel system, correctly noting that the retirement system would incentivize many, if not most, officers to retire from military service in their 40s. Senator Guy Cordon (R-OR) stated his concerns bluntly, saying that for those who reach the rank of colonel, the new personnel system “would mean that the average officer, figuring that he received his commission at age 22, would be forced to retire at 52 years of age. This seems to me to be a most wasteful and illogical requirement, particularly for the technical services.” Senator Harry Byrd (D-VA) agreed, saying, “That seems to me mighty early to retire a man, at 52.”²¹

Grinding Gears: The Shift to a Professionalized All-Volunteer Force. The era of the all-volunteer force brought significant changes to personnel policy beginning in 1968, when soon-to-be President Richard Nixon made a campaign promise to end conscription. That promise gave rise to the Gates Commission, a group of notable experts chaired by former Secretary of Defense Tom Gates fashioned to examine the viability of an all-volunteer force. On February 20, 1970, the commission

officially and unanimously recommended to President Nixon that the United States shift to an all-volunteer force (AVF). Nixon accepted the committee’s recommendation, and by 1973, the draft was officially discontinued.²²

Multiple causes contributed to the demise of the draft, but the evolving strategic context and manpower needs played a role.²³ The Vietnam War showed that servicemembers who had been drafted were much more prone to disciplinary problems, while an AVF was expected to be more professional and motivated to serve. Furthermore, turnover rates were expected to be lower among enlisted service members in an AVF, which would result in longer careers and more experienced personnel.²⁴

Several factors were expected to contribute to this evolution, including longer initial enlistments for volunteers, historically higher rates of reenlistment among volunteers, and generally higher pay and morale among volunteers as compared to draftees. In addition, members of an AVF would receive more on-the-job training and were expected, as a result, to be more productive and effective than members of a draft force.²⁵ All of these factors illustrate the benefit of an AVF over a conscripted force: Its servicemembers are better motivated, better trained, and more likely to serve for longer periods of time, all of which contributes to improved military readiness and efficiency.

There also were strategic reasons for shifting to an AVF at this point in history. Britain, which switched to an AVF in 1957, had simultaneously shifted its defense policies to emphasize nuclear deterrence over the utilization of land troops.²⁶ The U.S. military was undertaking a similar strategic and political shift in the 1970s away from major set-piece battles and a focus on mobilization toward the possibility of “come-as-you-are” warfare, where troops would quickly mobilize to respond to an immediate threat with little time to conscript fresh recruits.²⁷

As the all-volunteer force emerged, policymakers slowly began to realize that in order to retain talent, they would need to compete

with the private sector, especially in terms of compensation. This lag occurred even though the final report of the Gates Commission recommended various changes in both the officer and enlisted personnel systems, including substantial pay increases and compensation reforms.²⁸ For the first time in U.S. history, the military began to manage its enlisted personnel *intentionally*.

As analysts at the RAND Corporation note, the history of enlisted personnel policy is a history of responses to immediate events, not long-term policy strategies.²⁹ For nearly all of American history, enlisted personnel were rapidly conscripted or organized in response to a forthcoming conflict, paid very little, and disbanded quickly following the end of the conflict. Furthermore, the military did not have to compete with the private market for talent because recruits were required to serve either through direct conscription or through the formation of ad hoc regional militias.³⁰

DOPMA: One-Size-Fits-All. While the age of the all-volunteer force began in 1973, Congress waited nearly a decade to reform the personnel and promotion systems to account for this shift. Reform finally came in 1981 with the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) and the Reserve Officer Personnel Management Act (ROPMA). These reforms were notable for a few reasons.

First, DOPMA brought changes to the personnel and promotions systems, including:

- An officer structure simplified and standardized across the services to 10 ranks (O-1 through O-10);
- A standardized promotion system for *regular career officers*;
- A legal *DOPMA grade table* for both permanent and temporary promotion (services previously had greater discretion over temporary promotions);
- A “sliding-scale” grade effect for officers (when the officer corps shrinks, the

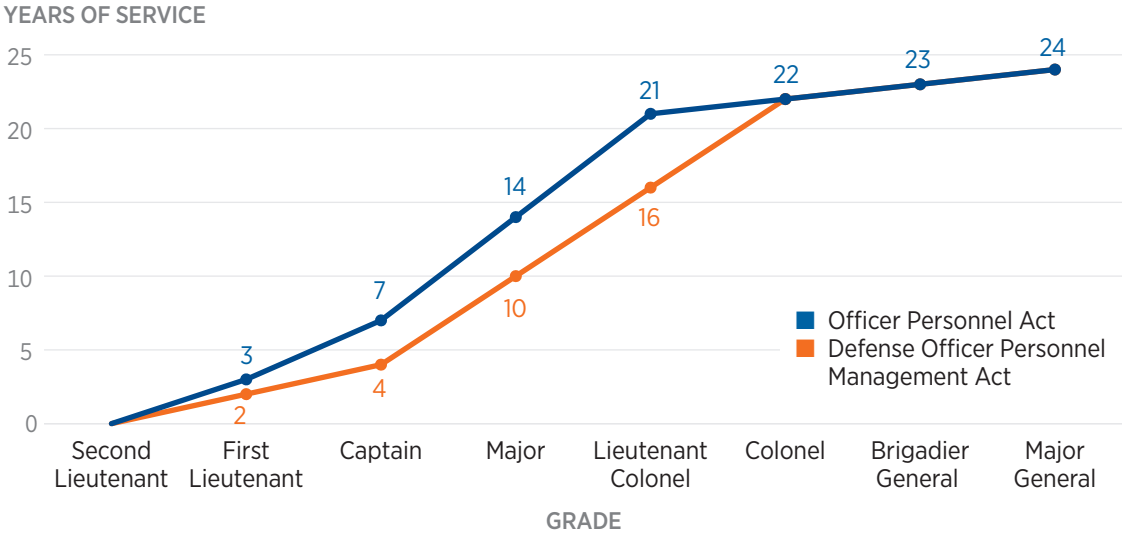
number of field-grade (O-4 through O-6) officers increases).

This standardization of career paths was largely welcomed, with a Member of the House of Representatives observing that “[t]o attract quality officers, we must be able to offer lieutenants and captains a reasonable, reliable career progression.”³¹ The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower, Reserve Affairs and Logistics at the time, Robert B. Pirie, Jr., also praised the bill as “a viable piece of legislation that on one hand represent[ed] the wishes of the Congress and on the other satisfie[d] the needs of the Department.”³² DOPMA’s reforms were a welcome change in a system instituted more than 20 years earlier and were instituted for much the same reason many are advocating for reforms today: the strategic need for high-quality officers.

These changes enshrined the one-size-fits-all military career, particularly for officers. This career, which is about the same length for most officers (regardless of specialty), is highly predictable from a management perspective and gives the services a stable officer corps in peacetime.³³ Still, while DOPMA was a wide-ranging law with significant effects, RAND analysts categorized it as a document that, rather than being truly revolutionary, merely expanded upon the post-World War II status quo.³⁴ This can be seen in Chart I, which illustrates how, despite the changes in the OPA framework instituted by DOPMA, the basic system remained largely the same

While DOPMA and ROPMA provided reform for officers, Congress barely touched the enlisted side of the ledger during this period. The policies that govern enlisted personnel mimic the officer side (i.e., strict time-in-grade limitation, up-or-out, etc.), and, unlike officer personnel policy, are largely under DOD’s discretion. It is worth noting that DOD does not often pursue radical changes in enlisted policy. Similarly, while ROPMA provided some clarity on the role of reserve officers in the overall structure of the forces, reserve personnel were still not well integrated with the active

Up or Out Promotion Path Pre- and Post-Defense Officer Personnel Management Act



SOURCE: H.R. 3800, Officer Personnel Act of 1947, Public Law 381, 61 Stat. 795, 80th Congress, 1st Sess., Title V, §512, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/80th-congress/session-1/c80s1ch512.pdf> (accessed July 21, 2018).

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component—something that remains true today. Many analysts have noted that the reserve component is both culturally segregated and underutilized.³⁵

After DOPMA and ROPMA, only one other piece of legislation attempted serious reform: the Goldwater–Nichols Act of 1986.

Goldwater–Nichols: A Push for Interoperability. Goldwater–Nichols was enacted in response to rising frustration that the forces were not sufficiently interoperable—that is, that they were not able to fight efficiently as a joint force. This frustration arose from military engagements in Iran (Operation Desert One); Grenada (Operation Urgent Fury); and Beirut.³⁶ During Desert One, an operation to extract hostages from Tehran, the U.S. lost eight servicemembers and significant amounts of equipment. The senior commander’s description of the operation provides some insight into the causes

of its failure: “four commanders at the scene without visible identification, incompatible radios, and no agreed-upon plan.”³⁷

Operations in Grenada were generally considered to be a success, but groups from the different services still had an extremely difficult time communicating with one another, particularly coordinating fire support. A Senate study of the Grenada mission concluded that “[t]he Services continue to operate as largely independent agencies, even at the level of the unified commands.”³⁸

In Beirut, where 241 servicemembers were killed in a tragic terrorist bombing, military leaders and policymakers further concluded that a distinct lack of interservice interoperability was to blame and that the combatant commanders still did not have enough direct authority to direct operations in the field.³⁹ Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral William Crowe stated that:

Like every other unified [combatant] commander, I could only operate through the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine component commanders, who stood between me and the forces in the field.... Component commanders reported to their own service chiefs for administration, logistics and training matters, and the service chiefs could use this channel to outflank the unified commander. There was sizeable potential for confusion and conflict.⁴⁰

As a result, Congress added additional requirements to the standard officer career path with the intention of improving the force's overall interoperability, especially regarding the experiences of general and flag officers (GFOs).⁴¹ These policies included a requirement that all officers selected for the rank of GFO must have served in a joint duty assignment and stipulated that GFOs' joint duty assignments would be for two years, compared with three years for other officers. It further required all general/flag officers to attend a joint Capstone course.⁴² This was the further evolution of and next logical step in the U.S. military's consistent emphasis on leadership and command ability since World War II.

One consequence of this change was the addition of four to five years to the standard military career. Some, including former DOD Undersecretary for Personnel and Readiness Bernard Rostker, were less than supportive of the change. In 2015, Rostker testified to Congress that Goldwater–Nichols “came at the cost of having less-experienced uniformed managers of the services.”⁴³

While ensuring that all general and flag officers would have joint force experience was generally accepted as a positive development and was intended to prevent a dangerous fissure from opening between operating forces and command staff without practical field experience, applying the policy uniformly across the officer corps effectively mandated that officers undergo training necessary only for a small subset. Goldwater–Nichols, along with

the other reforms of the 1980s, led some to criticize the officer personnel system as “grooming all officers to be chief of staff.”⁴⁴

Prior to recent reforms included in the FY 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), these were the last major reforms to the active-duty, enlisted, and reserve components, and they led to the structure of the armed forces as it stands today.

Does the System Work? The Challenges Facing America's Future Force

Overall, while the U.S. military personnel and promotions systems have evolved since World War II—thanks to DOPMA, ROPMA, Goldwater–Nichols, and other pieces of reform legislation—their fundamental structure and intent have remained largely the same. Ultimately, the majority of the force, especially ground-combat units, has continued to be made up of young and fit personnel, while officers have been presented with a single, uniform path for advancement with promotions based on and leading to increasingly higher levels of command responsibility.

The military created by this up-or-out, post-World War II personnel system has achieved significant strategic victories: It won the Cold War and protected the nation for 70 years. The system achieved precisely the outcomes that it was designed to achieve. Yet, given the changing security environment and new strategic needs, there are calls from some quarters for a more fundamental reimagining of the personnel system.

While core U.S. national security interests have largely remained constant in the quarter-century since the end of the Cold War, the threats arrayed against those interests are spreading geographically, transforming strategically, and evolving technologically. Once viewed as archaic, the threat of great-power conflict with the resurgence of Russia and rise of China is relevant once again. Add to that the more diffuse threats from malicious non-state actors that have mastered the techniques of unconventional warfare while metastasizing across much of the world. The tremendous

technological advances made by rogue nations could allow them to undermine much of the traditional military superiority long enjoyed by U.S. forces,⁴⁵ and new domains like cyberspace allow weaker powers to exploit unforeseen vulnerabilities.⁴⁶

New Threats, New Challenges. In this new normal, a military that is designed only to wage conventional war against great powers will likely not be adequate. Success against future enemies on new battlefields will require not only physical strength and vigor, but also (and increasingly) mental agility, technical experience, and rapid innovation. As the 2018 National Defense Strategy states, “a more lethal, resilient, and rapidly innovating Joint Force...will sustain American influence and ensure favorable balances of power that safeguard the free and open international order.”⁴⁷ Any changes in the strategies the military employs to counter these new threats and keep the nation safe should be reflected in the policies responsible for creating a force capable of executing those strategies, and this most definitely includes policies involving personnel. However, there are differing opinions on whether personnel reforms are necessary and, if they are, how extensive those reforms should be.

The most obvious personnel issue raised by the potential for conflicts waged as much on virtual as on physical battlefields is the need to attract a highly skilled and technologically savvy military workforce. But while constant news of increasingly grave cyber threats and the creation of a Cyber Force presents the most visible manifestation of the role of technology in a 21st century military, the implications are far more widespread and complicated. As Professor Schneider notes, “The defense community needs to do a better job [of] thinking about what this human looks like and how the U.S. military culture can adapt not only to technology, but [to] what we need for the warrior of the future.”⁴⁸

Sophisticated networked communications, drone-enabled reconnaissance, and even the integration of electronic warfare are being incorporated into platoon-level infantry tactics.

Autonomous systems will likely press the military to delegate decision-making to lower grades in order to keep up with the speed of warfare.⁴⁹

Perhaps the skills necessary to thrive in this environment can be taught, with updated military training being sufficient to turn recruits into 21st century warriors, but it is also quite possible that, unlike the physical strength and tactics needed for ground combat, some of the qualities the military will prize most in future servicemembers cannot simply be drilled into them. In that case, those with the skills to navigate this high-tech world could well be hotly pursued by private-sector firms that are able to pay many times more than the military and more interested in honing and maintaining their expertise than in commanding troops. If the military is to attract them, it might have to provide a value proposition other than the current one-size-fits-all career path.⁵⁰ To address this issue, the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act included provisions to allow for better-qualified officers to be placed at the top of promotion lists and for credit to be awarded to officers for experiences outside of traditional military service.

Another area in which changes in how the military carries out its mission affect how it recruits and manages personnel is train, advise, and assist missions. As the United States looks to other partner nations to share the burden of providing for mutual security, building the capacity of partner forces is likely to become a large part of the U.S. military mission. Traditionally, these operations are given to Special Operations Forces, who are comfortable working and embedding with partner militaries because of their high levels of training and experience. While Special Operations Forces offer impressive and unique capabilities, they have been heavily utilized over the past 15 years of fighting. Many such units have been required to focus their energy on counterterrorism missions, which makes it more challenging to prepare for the train, advise, and assist missions.⁵¹

To meet the train, advise, and assist demand in the future, the military will have to turn

to conventional units to satisfy much of the need. The cadre of mature, experienced, and well-trained personnel required for these missions can be found in the field-grade and non-commissioned officer corps, but the current promotion system also calls on servicemembers in these grades to be checking boxes as they carry out joint and other service-specific key assignments rather than devoting time in the field to teaching partner militaries. While these “check boxes” were initially established with the intent of ensuring that officers had experience with a wide scope of military affairs and operations, expanding security force assistance brigades within the conventional force would most likely require alternative promotion paths and more-flexible career models for both officers and enlisted personnel.

Relatedly, even as the military might increasingly need to rely on its Foreign Area Officers—servicemembers with specific linguistic, political, and cultural understanding of partner nations in which the military operates—there is currently little incentive for the best and brightest to pursue these careers. Specializing in a single country instead of commanding forces is currently not the way to advance to senior grades.

Such concerns about whether the current system can attract and retain the skills the military will need to win against 21st century adversaries led the Center for a New American Security’s Amy Schafer to argue that “[w]ithout a significant and long-overdue investment in our military’s human capital, the United States will struggle to maintain military superiority.”⁵² But there also are reasons to favor the current system. Mastery of combat arms remains the preeminent demand on the military; changes in military culture that detract from what Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis calls “lethality” or tinkering with career paths, which makes it more difficult for military planners to generate a force that is deployable and ready to fight at a moment’s notice, could do more to harm American military strength than to bolster it. Any changes in defense personnel systems must therefore be driven by careful assessment of

the strategic environment and the force needed to protect U.S. interests in that environment.

A Whole New World. As the strategic challenges facing the military have evolved, so too have the ambitions, expectations, and lifestyles of U.S. society. In 1960, just over a decade after the passage of the Officer Personnel Act of 1947, only 25 percent of married couples with children had two income earners. In the 1970s, when the draft ended, this figure was around 32 percent.⁵³ Today, over 60 percent of married couples with children are dual earners.⁵⁴ This is a tremendous change and presents a particular challenge for a military system that typically relocates its personnel every two to three years. The operational tempo and ever-present duty requirements of the military often prevent spouses—the majority of whom are women—from holding regular jobs.⁵⁵ These challenges are gaining more visibility; in the most recent NDAA, Congress ordered DOD to review the effects of frequent change-of-stations on military families and military readiness.

Another factor to consider is who is serving. A relatively small percentage of the U.S. population serves in the military—“0.4 percent of the population in 2015,” according to the Pew Research Center.⁵⁶ But military service is neither a duty heeded nor a burden shared by all. “[F]or a growing number of Americans,” Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned in 2010, “service in the military, no matter how laudable, is something for other people to do.”⁵⁷ Furthermore, those who join the military tend to have one thing in common: They come from military families.

A recent Blue Star Family survey shows that nearly three-fifths of servicemembers and their families have at least two other immediate family members who serve or have served in the military. According to a Department of Defense study, roughly 80 percent of new recruits have a military family member. The past 16 years of war, budgetary uncertainty, and troop reductions have exhausted the force. If today’s troops are the siblings, parents, aunts, and uncles of our future force, wearing them

TABLE 1

Personnel Cost Per Active-Duty Service Member

DOLLAR FIGURES ARE IN 2016 DOLLARS

	FY 2001	FY 2016	% Change, 2001–2016	FY 2017
Active-Duty End-Strength*	1,386,000	1,311,000	-5%	1,301,000
Pay-Like Compensation	\$50,670	\$73,038	44%	\$74,001
Basic Pay	\$33,326	\$40,450	21%	\$41,299
Retirement Costs	\$12,560	\$16,635	32%	\$15,906
Normal Pension Costs	\$12,560	\$12,699	1%	\$12,102
TRICARE For Life	\$0	\$3,936	—	\$3,804
Defense Health Program	\$11,661	\$24,940	114%	\$25,979
Total Personnel Costs	\$74,890	\$114,614	53%	\$115,886

* Not including Reservists or National Guard.

SOURCE: Bipartisan Policy Center, “The Military Compensation Conundrum: Rising Costs, Declining Budgets, and a Stressed Force Caught in the Middle,” September 2016, p. 11, <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/BPC-Defense-Personnel-Compensation.pdf> (accessed July 21, 2018).

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down could limit tomorrow’s recruits. Unfortunately, Blue Star Family data already show a worrying drop in the willingness of military families to recommend service to their children or to any young person.⁵⁸

This illustrates another issue facing America’s military: the civilian–military divide, which refers to the disconnect between America’s servicemembers and its people at large as a result of cultural, locational, and other differences.⁵⁹ As the gap continues to grow, young Americans from nonmilitary families will likely become less inclined to consider volunteering for military service simply because they have no meaningful personal contact with or awareness of it.⁶⁰

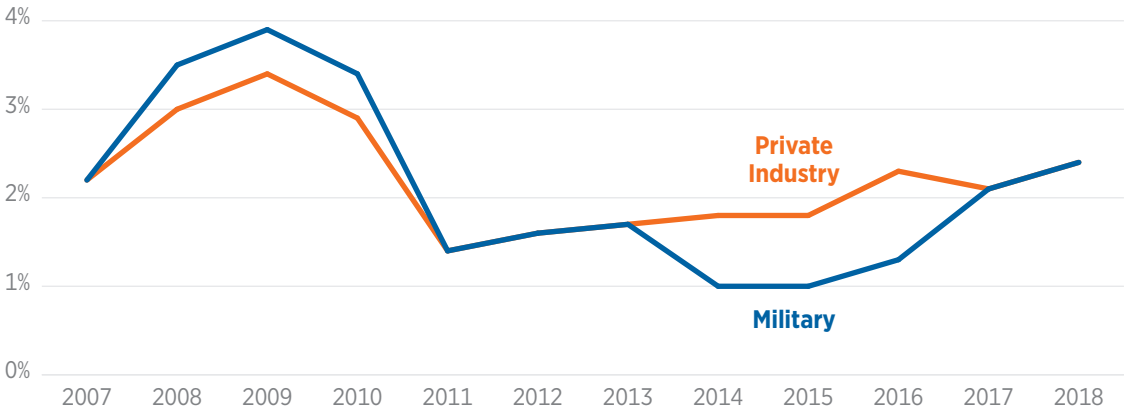
Meanwhile, leaning too heavily on one small segment of our population also could weaken our military. Already, because of obesity, a criminal record, or lack of educational achievement, only about a quarter of all 17-to-24-year-olds are eligible to serve. With so few able to serve, the military could struggle to fill its ranks should military families stop handing down their ethic of service.⁶¹

Experts in the field firmly believe that personnel policies are critical to meeting defense and national security objectives⁶² and that defense personnel policy should therefore be driven by the objective of ensuring or improving military effectiveness, not by other social or political goals. It very well might be true that in some circumstances, the armed forces are institutionally stronger, more coherent, better trained and disciplined, and more dedicated to their mission when they stand apart from the general population, but this is not always the case, and the historical record shows several examples of culturally distinct militaries performing worse on the battlefield than their material strength of men and arms would otherwise have predicted.⁶³

A responsible and effective personnel system must be mindful of the relation between the military and society, monitoring it for potential problems that could negatively affect the ability to attract sufficient recruits to meet end strength requirements—as the services’ personnel chiefs recently told Congress

How Military Compensation Compares to Private Industry

YEAR-ON-YEAR PERCENT CHANGE IN ACTIVE DUTY BASE PAY AND PRIVATE INDUSTRY COMPENSATION



SOURCE: Bipartisan Policy Center, “The Military Compensation Conundrum: Rising Costs, Declining Budgets, and a Stressed Force Caught in the Middle,” September 2016, p. 13, <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/BPC-Defense-Personnel-Compensation.pdf> (accessed July 21, 2018).

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is already happening⁶⁴—or to attract those with the skills and talents needed to execute military strategy. According to Representative Mike Coffman (R-CO), Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee’s Military Personnel Subcommittee, recruitment and retention challenges are exacerbated “by a lessened overall propensity to serve, reduced pool of qualified candidates and a robust economy.”⁶⁵ Some feel that this requires a reevaluation of traditional personnel regulations.

In an effort to address this, the 2019 NDAA repealed the age limit on enlisting in the officer corps and took steps to allow for credit to be awarded for nontraditional experiences. Keeping this in mind, closing the civilian-military divide should be the focus of personnel reforms in the coming years.

Budgetary Concerns. Yet another potential barrier to readiness is the increased reliance on fiscal retention bonuses to keep servicemembers in the military. As a result of the Budget Control Act of 2011, caps were placed on most defense spending. These caps

have led to a significant reduction in the defense budget (relative to previous estimates) and cuts in total military end strength and the operations and maintenance budget.⁶⁶ This in turn affects military readiness, as there are fewer troops with fewer supplies. In addition to the budget cuts, this issue is exacerbated by the rising costs of military personnel, in part because of the military’s very status as an AVF: Servicemembers must be competitively compensated in relation to the private sector, including costs of health care, retirement, and retention bonuses.⁶⁷

However, as Chart 2 shows, military compensation occasionally still lags behind compensation in the private sector. Given this, and given that DOD has only limited funds to spend, many argue that it is time to reevaluate the system to find ways to incentivize servicemember retention without the use of further financial bonuses.⁶⁸ These incentives could address quality-of-life issues such as geographic stability, more opportunities for promotions, and longer assignments.⁶⁹

Air Force Pilot Shortage Is Real, and Getting Worse

SOURCE: U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Military Personnel: DOD Needs to Reevaluate Fighter Pilot Workforce Requirements,” April 11, 2018, p. 11, <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-18-113> (accessed August 6, 2018).



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The Air Force’s Recurring Pilot Shortages: A Microcosm

Issues with recruiting and retention affect the service branches in distinct ways. For example, the U.S. military is the world’s preeminent air power, yet the Air Force is coming up short on the pilots needed to meet the U.S.’s stated national security objectives. The service is currently short at least 2,000 pilots, and that number is projected to increase substantially in coming years. As with previous shortfalls, the issue is multifaceted. As operations tempo (OPTEMPO) remains high, the service struggles to retain pilots, who feel burned out and overworked. At the same time, because the number of flight hours has decreased, pilots spend less time in the air training and more time on tasks unrelated to combat. Other factors have also contributed to the pilot shortage, including a lack of funding and excessive collateral duties.

Attempts to address the shortage, such as retention bonuses, have failed to stem the tide, and this failure indicates a deeper, structural problem with the Air Force personnel system⁷⁰—a problem that echoes the problems many see in the military’s personnel system as a whole. According to Lieutenant General Gina M. Grosso, Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel and Services,

“Retaining our pilot force goes beyond financial incentives...it’s about culture.”⁷¹ One fighter pilot who left the service agreed, stating that the reason most pilots leave is the same reason many join in the first place: They want to fly as much as they can, and Air Force pilots are often grounded by excessive administrative work⁷² and a lack of available aircraft.⁷³ A senior Air Force leader has said that fighter pilots average only about 16 flight hours per month.⁷⁴

This disconnect between the needs and wants of airmen and the structure of the Air Force personnel system translates into concrete financial losses for the Pentagon: Lieutenant General Grosso has testified that it costs approximately \$11 million “to train a fifth-generation fighter pilot” and that “a 1,200-fighter pilot shortage amounts to a \$12 billion capital loss for the Air Force.”⁷⁵ In addition, in line with the broader historical trends in personnel policy, while the fighter pilot occupation has changed significantly in recent years, the services have not reevaluated fighter squadron requirements.

These changes in the position, which include changes in aircraft technology and tactics, additional training, and the removal of squadron administrative support positions, have led to an unsustainable increase in

workload that financial bonuses simply have not alleviated. Air Force officials say these changes have not been incorporated into the assessment of minimum personnel requirements because the Air Force has been prioritizing recapitalizing its fighter aircraft fleet. While the Air Force has attempted to alleviate the pilot workload by hiring contractors, the shortage remains significant.

The pilot shortage illustrates on a smaller scale what the military is experiencing as a whole. Changing strategic needs and technical advancements, as well as increased workload and budget cuts, have caused a troubling decline in U.S. military readiness. To address these problems successfully, we must consider the needs and desires of the servicemembers

who are the most fundamental part of American military superiority.

Conclusion

The nation's future national security depends on attracting the service of capable men and women with the necessary skill sets. America's military is nothing without the dedication of those who choose to serve. To ensure that the United States maintains its military advantage over its adversaries, lawmakers and defense leaders will have to evaluate whether the ways in which the military attracts, promotes, and retains servicemembers is contributing to or hindering the creation of a force capable of countering 21st century challenges.

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