

Forget the Draft: Fix the volunteer force and they will come

By Cindy Williams

For the first time since ending the draft in 1973, the United States is putting its all-volunteer military to the test. For the most part, the force is meeting the challenge for operations worldwide, but there are signs of strain. The Army is dipping into the store of recruits it had banked for next year, and taking the unusual step of calling up members of the Individual Ready Reserve. Recruitment and retention in the National Guard are below needed levels. Units stationed in Korea and at elite training centers are being deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, and the services are turning more often to contractors to handle jobs that come too close for comfort to military combat or other core functions of government.

Some members of Congress have jumped to the conclusion that the United States should restore conscription. But returning to the draft is the wrong answer. The military faces people problems that are deeper and more serious than the troop shortages, but the problems can and should be solved in the context of the all-volunteer force.

Even if the nation decided to double the number of active-duty troops in deployable Army units (currently about 300,000), it could do so by adding military recruiters and increasing the bonuses paid to individuals when they join or re-enlist. Moreover, bringing back conscription would greatly compound discipline problems and increase turnover, straining the training system and potentially compromising military outcomes.

A draft would do nothing to help the Defense Department solve its more serious military personnel problems. Indeed, the biggest problem the department faces is not that it lacks people, but that it has the wrong people for many of its jobs.

In recent years, the services were overstaffed in about 40 percent of their occupations, even as they suffered shortages in about 30 percent. True, the Army is short of infantry and military police, but it has temporary authority to increase its ranks by 30,000 troops. By contrast, the Air Force is overstaffed by 24,000 members and the Navy wants to thin its ranks by 25,000 sailors. Both the Navy and the Air Force are short-staffed in critical skills such as electronic systems repair and some information specialties, and they have too many people in mundane occupations.

Under the leadership of Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Vern Clark, the Navy is taking steps to reverse its staffing imbalances by training sailors to work in a wider variety of positions, improving educational opportunities, offering cash bonuses and an online auction to attract people into hard-to-fill jobs, turning to civilians for jobs that do not require service members, and shedding unnecessary positions.

Staffing imbalances have roots in the systemic flaws of military pay and retirement structures. These flaws existed well before the all-volunteer force was created and will persist even if the United States returns to a draft. Even Clark's valuable reforms cannot correct them.

The staffing problems stem in part from the pay equality that is a hallmark of U.S. military compensation. With some exceptions, the size of a service member's paycheck is determined not by his or her military occupation, but by rank, time in service, work location and family status. As a result, a married sergeant at Fort Bragg, N.C., with seven years in the Army typically brings in the same monthly pay as anyone else with that rank, time in service and family status. Less than 4 percent of the money the government spends on military pay goes toward bonuses and special pay that can vary by occupation. That stands in stark contrast with the private sector, where pay varies widely according to occupations. An information specialist with several years' experience in the private sector might earn twice as much as a cook; in the military, the two would likely earn the same.

Service members with technology skills often are underpaid in comparison with those in the private sector, while the ones who lack those skills might be paid substantially more than their private sector counterparts. Pay equality sets up a skewed incentive structure. Service members whose skills are highly valued in the private sector have a strong financial incentive to leave the service, while those with more mundane skills have a strong incentive to stay.

The problem is exacerbated by an outdated, rigid retirement system that makes no distinction across occupations. The military provides no pension for members who serve less than 20 years. For those who stay on active duty for at least 20 years, it provides an immediate lifetime annuity. This "cliff vesting" induces people, regardless of their occupations, to serve for 20 years and then, because the pension is immediate and generous, to depart shortly afterwards.

All four services have ambitious plans to transform their forces and the way they conduct military operations. The future forces are meant to be more agile and autonomous and to rely more on information and technology systems. Transformation will exacerbate the problems posed by the military pay and retirement schemes.

Structural ills are best treated by structural remedies. The nation must find a way to bring greater variability to military pay, allowing the services to pay competitive wages. The Defense Department and Congress should work together to improve bonuses for people in critical, understaffed occupations. New bonuses could be offset in the budget by minimizing across-the-board raises that fuel the structural imbalances. Over the longer term, they should work toward a more flexible pay structure that accounts for differences among occupations. In addition, work should begin now to develop a less rigid military retirement system with earlier vesting opportunities and greater variation by military occupation.

Bringing back the draft could help populate the lowest ranks with young, inexperienced recruits, but America's military power depends on well-trained professionals serving in the right jobs. Filling the ranks to meet our future needs requires structural reform, not a new draft.

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