



Cato Handbook for Policymakers

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7TH EDITION

48. Strengthening the All-Volunteer Military

Policymakers should

- accelerate the pullout of American troops from Iraq;
- improve recruiting programs and enlistment inducements, especially for hard-to-fill occupational specialties;
- continue to change the mix between active and reserve forces to reflect current military commitments, and further reduce the frequency and length of overseas tours;
- consider creating special reserve units designed for garrison duty;
- fully withdraw U.S. forces from outdated cold war deployments in Asia and Europe; and
- drop draft registration and eliminate the Selective Service System.

Thirty-six years ago, the U.S. government inaugurated the All-Volunteer Force. The AVF proved itself an exceptionally proficient and highly adaptable fighting force, capable of deterring superpower competitors and destroying regional powers with relative ease. Now, however, it is under enormous strain. The U.S. military lacks sufficient manpower to satisfy the demands of an imperial foreign policy. The leading source of stress is the war in Iraq. The Iraq conflict alone has taken a heavy toll on the military not only because of the thousands of dead and wounded, but also because of the lengthy and unexpected overseas deployments. Although defenders of the continuing U.S. military presence in Iraq routinely complained that the media were focusing on bad news, the troops lived the bad news.

There is likely to be a sizable U.S. military presence in Iraq for some time, irrespective of the Iraqi government's preferences. But even if troop

levels in Iraq begin to drop, those in Afghanistan are likely to increase. Until both wars are concluded, American service personnel will suffer under severe pressure.

The troops nevertheless have performed exceptionally well, and the military has suffered fewer cracks than expected. The United States managed to meet its occupation numbers by turning the Reserves and National Guard into de facto active duty units. The military further met recruiting and retention concerns by imposing “stop-loss,” thereby preventing personnel from leaving when their service terms had expired; recalling to active duty many reservists, including members of the rarely used Individual Ready Reserve; increasing recruiting and retention bonuses; and lowering quality standards for new recruits, including accepting older recruits (up to age 42) and issuing more “moral” waivers for once-disqualifying factors, such as criminal convictions.

The military remains worried about the sustainability of the high-quality AVF. Army Chief of Staff General George Casey told Congress: “Our soldiers are deploying too frequently. We can’t sustain that.” Secretary of the Army Pete Geren worried that “we are consuming readiness as fast as we build it.”

Unfortunately, any upcoming relief for the U.S. military will be modest. The Pentagon has had trouble finding sufficient soldiers to man its commitments, and any worsening of the situations in Iraq or Afghanistan or involvement in another conflict would quickly reverse that trend.

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

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

America is now in its eighth year of war in Afghanistan and its sixth year of war in Iraq. The treaty being negotiated between Washington and

Baghdad reportedly envisions a continuing U.S. troop presence until 2010, and an American exit from Afghanistan is getting more rather than less distant. How to maintain these deployments?

Adding Marine Corps actives, as the Department of Defense did in spring 2004, helped. At plan's end, in 2012, the Marine Corps will count 202,000 men and women in its ranks, a 16 percent increase over where it was before 9/11. But the marines are a relatively small force that is intended to respond to unexpected contingencies. Warned the Congressional Budget Office, "If all Marine regiments were either deployed, recovering after deployments, or preparing for deployments . . . , DOD's ability to quickly deploy substantial combat power in the early phases of an operation would be degraded." The Marine Corps has had to extend the tours of some personnel stationed in Afghanistan. The U.S. Army's "end strength" will grow to 547,000 in 2012, up from 480,000 before 9/11, but these additional troops cannot solve all the problems that are straining the AVF.

Besides, where can bodies be found? Adding forces takes money and time. The Congressional Budget Office concluded: "Recruiting, training, and equipping two additional divisions would entail up-front costs of as much as \$18 billion to \$19 billion and would take about five years to accomplish. . . . In the long run, the cost to operate and sustain these new divisions as a permanent part of the Army's force structure would be about \$6 billion annually (plus between \$3 billion and \$4 billion per year to employ them in Iraq)." Such a troop buildup, however, merely pushes the problem one step back. If it is hard to meet today's recruiting goals, how will the military (mainly the army) meet even higher recruiting and retention goals? Creating and training new combat divisions will take time and money, but those can only go so far if the right people are reluctant to join up.

Today, the armed services are having trouble because excessive and unpleasant commitments make it harder for them to attract and keep enough people. The reluctance to serve reflects the attitudes first of those asked to sign up. Those with more of a career orientation toward the military—and especially the army—are likely to hesitate if they fear spending multiple tours in a combat zone. Also critical is the attitude of families of prospective recruits. Army recruiters are finding increasing resistance from parents, especially when they seek to recruit 17-year-olds, who need parental approval to join. In some communities, activists, including parents, have organized to counteract military recruiters.

Even more important is the attitude of families for members already in the service. There's an army saying that "we enlist an individual and reenlist a family." Warned retired Army Colonel Robert Maginnis, "Either we find a fix to rotate those troops out and to keep the families content . . . or we're going to suffer what I anticipate is a downturn in retention." So far, the Department of Defense has made most of its manpower targets by adjusting its quality standards. The army and Army Reserve faced the most serious problems. Moreover, admitted Defense Under Secretary David Chu, "Certain high-demand (high-use) units and specialties have experienced higher than normal attrition." By accepting recruits with lower Armed Forces Qualification Test scores, and more recruits who've received general equivalency diplomas rather than high school diplomas and have been in legal trouble, the Pentagon has papered over the problem. Although military efficiency will suffer at the margin, the AVF remains a higher-quality force than the draft military.

In fact, virtually no one who lacks a high school or general equivalency diploma and who doesn't score in the top three of five categories of the Armed Forces Qualification Test can join. This has resulted in a military that is overwhelmingly middle-class; the test scores and educational achievements of recruits exceed those of young people generally. African Americans have traditionally been somewhat overrepresented, but they disproportionately serve in support, not combat arms, and their personnel share has been falling. Hispanics are underrepresented.

Every recent war has sparked proposals for restarting conscription. With the Iraq War, Rep. Charles Rangel (D-NY) and former senator Fritz Hollings (D-SC) introduced legislation to establish a system of conscription-based national service. Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) once supported a draft and national service, but more recently has said it would be needed only during an emergency. What he would do if recruiting became significantly more difficult is unclear.

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

Although a volunteer military beats a draft force, Washington risks driving down recruiting and retention, which, over the long term, could

wreck the AVF. However, the surest barrier to a policy of promiscuous military intervention is not a draft, which allowed the Vietnam War to proceed for years, but the AVF, which empowers average people to say no.

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

What to do to strengthen the armed services? The obvious place to start is improved pay and benefits, especially for National Guard and Reserve members, who are increasingly being treated like active duty soldiers. One proposal is to extend health insurance for National Guard and Reserve members even when they are not deployed. Also, improved treatment for those deployed overseas, and particularly in battle zones, is imperative. Policymakers should continue programs, such as the rest and recuperation program begun in 2003, in which soldiers are allowed 15 days at home, as well as the program that pays for service personnel’s travel to their hometowns from troop arrival points at Dallas–Fort Worth, Atlanta, and Baltimore–Washington airports. Resources also need to be put into recruiting, by increasing signing bonuses, doubling the advertising budget, and developing cyberrecruiting.

The Department of Defense needs to rethink the mix of duties within services as well as shift some billets between active and reserve forces. It should also consider establishing a multitiered reserve force, with some units available for longer-term deployments, others for temporary emergencies, and a number for homeland duties. The Congressional Budget Office suggested creating temporary “constabulary” units made up of members of the Individual Ready Reserve and people who recently left active or Reserve and/or National Guard service. Such units could train for six months, deploy for one year, and then disband. Moreover, the military could offer higher compensation to reservists willing to accept more frequent deployment.

The first priority should be to expeditiously exit Iraq. Lawrence Korb, the assistant secretary of defense for manpower in the Reagan administration, points to Gen. Maxwell Taylor, who observed that we went to

Vietnam to save the country but had to withdraw from Vietnam to save the army. The Baghdad government made clear in the negotiations over a status-of-forces agreement with Washington that the American troops could not stay forever. In 2008, the Bush administration and some presidential candidates apparently hoped to draw out the process as long as possible, if not permanently. But it is in America's interest to pull out U.S. troops as soon as possible. The United States should also drop other unnecessary commitments. We have been slowly drawing down our forces in South Korea and Germany, but far more could be done.

The U.S. military won the cold war, defeated a host of small states with minimal casualties, and could overwhelm any competitor today. But the armed services cannot do everything. Conscription is no answer. Fiddling with military compensation and force structure would help, but would not address the basic problem. Only abandoning a foreign policy of empire will eliminate pressure to create an imperial military.

Suggested Readings

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