Fighting for a Living

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Soldiering as work

The all-volunteer force in the United States

Beth Bailey

On 30 June 1973 Dwight Elliot Stone, the last man to be conscripted into the US military, reported for basic training. The following day the United States began its experiment with an all-volunteer force.¹

Most Americans understood this move as a major and unprecedented transformation – even as a radical experiment – even though the longstanding draft was, in fact, the aberration. Until Cold War pressures convinced Americans that a large standing army was justified, the nation had relied on a volunteer force, turning to conscription only in time of war. But memories were short. Even though the draft had been in effect for only thirty-three years, from 1940 through slightly more than three decades of war and tense peace, conscription had come to seem normal, an expected part of young men’s lives.

Short memories aside, however, those who saw the all-volunteer force (AVF) as a radical experiment had a point. It was clear in 1973 that the nation would need to recruit 20,000 to 30,000 nonprior service (NPS) accessions a month – vastly more than in the all-volunteer past. And they would have to do so from a population of youth that could generously be characterized as antimilitary, persuading them to join a troubled institution at the end of a difficult and unpopular war. The chair of the House Armed Services Committee was widely quoted as he quipped – repeatedly – that the only way the United States could get a volunteer force was to draft one.²

The American move from one military form to another was not messy and gradual, as are many of the transitions discussed in this volume. Instead it was clear and absolute, from one day to the next, and both the end of conscription and the structure of the new system were argued over, legislated, planned, observed, analyzed, and evaluated. Thus it is possible to discuss not only the key social, economic, demographic, and technological variables that produced the United States’ modern volunteer force, but also the struggles to shape that force and to give meaning to the experience of military service in the post-Vietnam War United States. Significantly, many

¹ Evans, “The All-Volunteer Army After Twenty Years”, p. 40.
² Quote in O’Sullivan and Meckler, The Draft and Its Enemies, p. 228.
of those at the forefront of the move to an AVF consciously and purposely attempted to redefine military service as labor. Rejecting the idea that military “service” was an obligation of citizenship, these partisans worked to shift decisions about who would fight from the community and the state to the individual and the market.

In the first half of this chapter I will offer a history of the move from conscription-based to volunteer force in the United States and explore some of the major consequences of that transformation. Looking past the formative decade, I will discuss the implications of defining soldiering as work and relying on a national labor market to fill the military ranks, always reminding readers that the US all-volunteer force is the product of a specific historical time and place. I will then situate the AVF in the broad taxonomy of military service as labor, analyzing it in relation to the standard set of proposed variables in order to allow crossnational and chronological comparisons.

My analysis here focuses on the US Army. While each force – the army, air force, navy, marines, and coast guard – had specific and somewhat different experiences in the transition to and development of an all-volunteer force, the army was affected more than any other service. As the largest branch of the US armed forces (with active component end strength of 562,400 in 2010, compared to the next largest branch, the navy’s 324,239), the army has to recruit, train, and maintain a much greater number of troops than any other service. And, significantly for a study of military service as labor, the army is the least specialized service, the one with the largest range of military occupational specialties (MOSs) or, in language even the army sometimes adopted, “jobs”.


4 The second reason for my army focus is a practical one. Although the AVF is a natural topic for labor historians, that promise has not yet been fulfilled. Very little has been written on the post-1973 volunteer force, and most of what exists is on the army. See Bailey, America’s Army, and Robert K. Griffith’s meticulously researched internal history, The US Army’s Transition to the All-Volunteer Force. Rostker, I Want You!, offers a detailed policy history with an accompanying CD of archival documents. Given the multiple differences in size, structure, organization, and recruiting strategies among the services, I am discussing general factors leading to the move from a conscription-based to an all-volunteer military, but focusing on the implications for and actions of the US Army.
Historical background

From 1973 through the early 1980s, the US Army called itself the MVA: the modern volunteer army. "Modern", here, distinguished this volunteer army from those that came before. Although the draft had been in place (with only a short break) since 1940, the United States had relied on a volunteer force for most of its history. In the beginning, the British colonies in North America had adopted the British militia system, which defined all able-bodied citizens of each colony as members of a common militia, jointly responsible for defense of their homes. While this sounds like universal military obligation, that understanding rests on an anachronistic reading of "citizen". Only free white males had the rights and obligations of citizenship. And although an active militia, composed of volunteers, stood ready, if too few stepped forward, men could be conscripted from the larger common militia. Even in such cases, exemptions were common. More than two hundred laws offered excuse from military obligation, and not surprisingly most of them favored the economically successful and socially well-positioned.5

The militia system carried over into the new nation, despite President George Washington’s desire for a standing army subject to federal authority. It was not until the US Civil War (1861-1865) that a federal system of conscription was implemented. This war was fought with mass armies – 2.2 million Union troops and more than 750,000 Confederate – and both governments turned to conscription. Nonetheless, the Confederacy exempted slaveholders and in the north men were allowed to purchase “substitutes”. And conscription met with great resistance; the first Union draft inductees were announced in New York just days after more than 5,500 men died in the battle of Gettysburg. The draft riots that followed cost more than a hundred lives.6

From the Civil War until 1940, the United States maintained a small, volunteer, standing army, turning to conscription in times of war. But in 1940, aware that the United States would not likely stand apart from the war raging in Europe, President Franklin D. Roosevelt instituted the nation’s first peacetime draft. A long five years later, as the nation began the process of demobilizing the more than 12 million men and women in uniform,

5 Segal, Recruiting for Uncle Sam, pp. 18-24. Segal offers a history of manpower policy from colonial times through the 1980s. Other significant works on the selective service system in the twentieth century are Flynn, The Draft, 1940–1973, and Chambers, To Raise an Army. See also Cohen, Citizens and Soldiers.

Americans assumed that the draft had been, once again, an unwelcome necessity of war. But the Cold War seemed to demand a large standing army, and a brief experiment with voluntarism left way too many boots unfilled. And then the North Korean army crossed the 38th parallel.

In a society still shadowed by world war, its people still versed in the language of service and sacrifice, military service and citizen's obligation remained closely joined.7 The joint congressional committee on the draft stated unequivocally in 1951 that “the duty of bearing arms in defense of the nation is a universal duty”, and Dwight D. Eisenhower, former commander-in-chief of World War II Allied expeditionary forces in Europe, insisted repeatedly during his 1952 presidential campaign that military service was “an obligation that every citizen owes the nation”. High school students encountered the familiar argument in “Are You Ready for Service”, a filmstrip that was distributed to classrooms across the nation by the same production company responsible for the instructional films “Are You Popular?” (1947) and “What to Do on a Date” (1951), in which a World War II veteran explained to his sons, one already in uniform, that military service was the most significant obligation of citizenship.8

Though young American men were subject to the draft, those charged with defending the nation’s security saw a new world in which victory would be won through scientific and technological development, not with the mass armies of the past. (In fact, the overarching message of “Are You Ready for Service” was: stay in school.) The director of the Scientific Manpower Commission argued, rather coldheartedly, that a GI was quickly trained whereas a physicist was not, and such reasoning supported deferments not only for students studying science and technology but for most college students who managed to pass their courses.9 These deferments, however, were not especially controversial because so few men were drafted.

In the years following World War II the children born of the postwar American baby boom moved through American society like, as people said at the time, a pig in a python. The population bulge that caused elementary schools to sprout on the American landscape at the beginning of the 1950s translated into a flood of young men eligible for military service in the early 1960s. There were 8 million men between the ages of nineteen and twenty-

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7 For a more complete version of this discussion, see Bailey, America’s Army, pp. 1-33.
five in 1958; six years later there were 12 million. At the same time, the army (by far the largest service) had fallen from 1.5 million to 860,000 active troops over the course of the 1950s. Abundance created its own challenges: deferment categories were expanded; qualifications were raised – but there were still too many men available for a shrinking armed forces, and no way to conceive of enough legitimate deferments to manage the glut of available manpower. The Pentagon discussed ending the draft in 1958; the issue got some attention again during the 1960 presidential election, as Democrats criticized the existing system, and in 1964 Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, true to his libertarian values, announced that he would end the draft if elected and incumbent Lyndon B. Johnson ordered yet another study of the issue. But in 1965 Johnson authorized a large-scale buildup of American ground troops in Vietnam and, in an attempt to deflect national attention from the escalation, decided to rely on the draft instead of activating the reserves.

Transition to an all-volunteer force

On 17 October 1968 – two and a half weeks before the presidential election, and at the height of American involvement in the Vietnam War – Republican candidate Richard M. Nixon proposed to end the draft. It was not quite so radical a proposal as it sounds; Nixon made clear that conscription would continue in some form until the United States resolved its role in Vietnam. Nonetheless, he pledged, if elected president, to begin moving immediately toward that goal.

Nixon’s motivations were, of course, primarily political. He meant to shake up the campaign in its final days, to show himself as someone capable of thinking boldly and of taking action. Nixon had chosen an issue that mattered to a great many Americans and, if many of them did not cross party lines to vote for Nixon, they nonetheless supported his plan. By the late 1960s there was, in effect, a perfect storm of factors that led to the end of conscription, some of which had little directly to do with the military: a strong and widespread sentiment that the draft was not fair, a demographic

11 On Johnson’s decision, see Olson and Roberts, Where the Domino Fell, p. 127, and Dallek, Flawed Giant, pp. 271-277.
bulge in the draft-age population, attempts by liberals and the left to make it more difficult to send troops to war, newly powerful claims that the free market provided the best solution to most problems, and shifting possibilities for women and members of ethnic and racial minority groups in American society. Nonetheless, it was the Nixon administration’s concerted efforts that brought an end to the draft.13

Many, in early 1969, believed that Nixon’s promise had been no more than last-minute politics, a move meant to sway wavering supporters in a time of enormous political anger and national division. After all, Nixon had not discussed his proposal with the Pentagon, with military leaders, or with members of Congress. Nonetheless, one of his first actions as president was to establish the President’s Commission on the All-Volunteer Force, a group of civilian and former military leaders that was charged not with exploring the possibility of an AVF, but with crafting a plan to create one.

The commission, often referred to as the Gates Commission because it was chaired by former secretary of defense Thomas Gates, included both civilian and retired military members.14 At the beginning, opinion was divided and Gates himself told President Nixon that he was opposed to the change. This group, over several months, moved from initial divisions to a unanimous report. That was due, in large part, to the sorts of evidence they considered. The frame of the debate had been set well before the commission heard testimony or considered evidence. It was the staff, not the commissioners, who proposed the agendas, directed the research, gathered the evidence, drafted the report. And four of the five staff members were anti-conscription free-market economists with significant public reputations of their own. It is not that they were able to impose their opinions on the distinguished members of the commission – it is hard to imagine retired four-star generals and a former secretary of defense being pushed around by their staff – it was that they asked certain types of questions and provided evidence to answer them. Believing in clear data and quantifiable proof, they had little patience for qualitative questions about the meaning of military service or the obligations of citizenship. Their carefully gathered data supported the “hidden tax” argument. Their evaluation of economic variables strengthened the arguments of the three free-market economists

13 For a more complete discussion of Nixon’s proposal and the Gates Commission, see Bailey, America’s Army, pp. 21-33.
14 For records of the President’s Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force (the Gates Commission), see the Lauris Norstad Papers and the Alfred M. Gruenther Papers, Dwight David Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas [henceforth, DDEL].
who sat on the commission: Milton Friedman, Alan Greenspan, and W. Allen Wallis. Thus, while opposition to the draft took a wide variety of forms, the report that would structure the new AVF built on one key premise: the military must compete more effectively in the national labor market. The main answer the Gates Commission offered was competitive wages.

The strongest opposition to the move came from the armed services, though once confronted with an order from their commander-in-chief all generally worked hard to put successful plans in place. From the military and the general public, there were three major objections to the end of the draft.

The first was philosophical. Those who believed that military service was an obligation of citizenship worried about the centrality of money in this new model. One member of the Gates Commission initially noted that he had “serious philosophical reservations about paying people to die for their country”, to which Milton Friedman replied that he did “not see how morale and effectiveness were enhanced by paying people substandard wages”, for the “logic of such an approach would dictate paying them nothing”. Even though, in the end, the commission report was unanimous, some members remained convinced that there were moral issues that could not be reduced to economic terms. And in both public discussions and congressional hearings, the term “mercenary” was frequently used.

The second objection, voiced most strongly by members of the military, was that military service is not simply a job nor the military simply an employer. It was not only the risks that were different, but the other demands: the military required immediate obedience to authority; it exercised control over almost all aspects of individuals’ lives; it attempted to separate its members from the comforts and distractions of civilian society. And while some civilian workers might risk their lives in the course of their work – police officers, firefighters – none of them could be ordered to kill. From a different vantage, others argued that men who think of military service primarily as a job, who are drawn by the promise of a wage, simply would not make good soldiers.

Finally, many commentators and analysts worried that it was imprudent to leave the military at the mercy of the market. Some argued that the military might not compete well in the open market – a reasonable assumption at the end of an unpopular war, though the economic downturn that began in 1973 did create more fertile ground for recruiters. Others feared that the...
AVF would simply replace the selective service system with an “economic draft” and that the new all-volunteer force would be filled with poor, alienated African American men (though some were objecting to such potential exploitation while others worried about angry black men with guns and weapons training). Still others quoted the chair of the House Armed Services Committee’s claim: the only way to get a volunteer force would be to draft one. They believed it just could not be done. In the end, however, almost all involved in the debates over the AVF believed the volunteer force would serve as the core of the US military and as the nation’s peacetime force. In the event of a major conflict or long-lasting war, they assumed, the United States would once again turn to the draft.

Implementation

The military did, in fact, face an enormous challenge, and the army most of all. In the wake of a war gone badly wrong, an unpopular institution wracked by internal crisis had to recruit 20,000 to 30,000 young Americans a month (by contrast, in 2010 army recruiting aimed for approximately 65,000 nonprior-service recruits a year) from a racially, culturally, and politically divided society in which young people were overwhelming opposed to the military and more comfortable with the urging to “question authority” than with an automatic “yes, sir”. As one quick illustration: a carefully conducted survey in April 1971 discovered that 88 per cent of young men either “probably” or “definitely” did not want to join the army.\(^1\)

Faced with such grim prospects, the army began two linked efforts, each of which relied, at least partially, on models of civilian labor or the market. During the early 1970s, in an attempt to improve its image, the army initiated a series of highly publicized reforms. Many were based on research into what young people would find acceptable work conditions and often relied on analogies to the civilian workplace. In the early 1970s potential volunteers were promised forty-hour work-weeks and paid vacations. Announcing the end of reveille and bed-checks, army reformers made the point that civilian bosses did not check to see if their employees were

in bed at 10 p.m. More sophisticated arguments also used the language of work. When Pete Dawkins, a young and highly decorated major who had, while at West Point, won the Heisman Trophy for the most outstanding player in American college football, testified before Congress about the coming “modern volunteer army”, he played down the reform of living conditions and the army’s newly competitive pay, emphasizing instead a different aspect of labor. To attract volunteers, he argued, the army would need to offer recruits “the ability to grow in one’s work, the ability to achieve recognition for achievement, the opportunity to really have work challenges [...]” The army Dawkins envisioned would offer the satisfaction of meaningful labor.

The military also began trying to compete more effectively in the labor market, offering benefits that research suggested would attract the sort of volunteers they wanted: bonuses for enlistment, money for college, job training, leadership skills, travel, adventure, and (initially, for women) good marriage prospects. Far-sighted reformers also began to focus on advertising. This was also, in a different sense, a turn to the market, though a market more broadly defined. Economists had, at that time, not yet begun to factor irrational forces into their calculations and the economists whose arguments shaped the Gates Commission conclusions had relied on fairly basic labor models of supply, demand, and competitive wages. Offer young men a decent wage, they claimed, and a sufficient number would enlist. Individuals would make decisions based on rational understandings of their own economic self-interest.

These, however, were not days of measured rationality in American society. And the market, in 1970s America, was not simply a realm of rational economic choice. It was a site of consumer desire; it was a volatile space of inchoate needs, hopes, and fears. These military officers, paradoxically, understood the complexity of this “market” better than the Chicago School economists. They adopted consumer capitalism’s most powerful tools, turning to the most sophisticated marketing and advertising firms of the day in attempts to discover what young people wanted and sell it back to them in the shape of the military. Although the slogans varied (“Today’s Army Wants
to Join You” was the initial campaign), all attempted to convince young people that military service was not about obligation, but opportunity.

That opportunity took different forms. Some of it was slightly misconceived reassurance: the initial advertisements made the unlikely claim that joining the army required no sacrifice of individuality – an important concept to 70s youth – not even the traditional “skin-head” haircut. At the same time, these ads offered a chance to “build your mind and body […] further your education, become expert at a skill, have opportunities for advancement, travel, and 30 days vacation a year”. One series of advertisements asked potential volunteers to “Take the Army’s 16-month tour of Europe”, a witty turn on the multiple meanings of tour that conflated the army tour of duty with the grand tour of Europe that more prosperous youth enjoyed. But many ads made a more basic offer. “We’ve got over 300 good, steady jobs”, read the headline on a Reader’s Digest advertisement that prompted more than 30,000 young men to send in postcards requesting more information. Another ad inquired, “What are you doing after school?”

Initial results of the move to an AVF: “quality”, race, and gender

The turn to the labor market would have profound implications for the composition of the army. Even though selective service system regulations had allowed college youth to defer or avoid military service in high numbers over the previous decades, and even though military reliance on quantitative test scores to sort draftees into different military occupations meant that more privileged youth were less likely to find themselves on the front lines, the draft did reach more widely and deeply through American society than would a volunteer force.

The army entered the national job market with a great disadvantage in that historical moment. While it continued to draw young men and women who had a family military tradition or other cultural reasons to enlist, few of those who had other options chose to enter the military in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War. In the early years of the all-volunteer force, the army relied primarily on those young men who were least competitive

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20 Advertisements created for the US Army by N.W. Ayer are collected in the N.W. Ayer Advertising Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
in the civilian labor market. As the unemployment rate skyrocketed in the early 1970s, from 4.9 per cent 1973 to 8.5 per cent 1975 (or 16.1 per cent for sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds), the military had greater appeal. But the army still struggled to find a quarter-million nonprior service recruits a year, and struggled also with the fact that the men the marketplace most easily supplied were not those deemed “high-quality”.

“Quality”, according to the US military, is a quantifiable term based on two key criteria. A high-quality recruit holds an earned high school diploma (not a GED) and scores in the top half of the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) portion of what is now called the ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery). Test scores are divided into five categories, which fall into a bell curve. Thus scores that fall into categories I-IIIA signal “high-quality”. To make clear what military and civilian leaders were arguing about: no one had a problem with category IIIB recruits or even, in many cases, category IVA. But the 10-15 AFQT scores that put potential recruits into CAT IVB were, according to the army, roughly equivalent to IQ scores of 71-81. In the early 1970s, the army was permitted 18 per cent CAT IV nonprior service recruits a year; currently the limit is 2 per cent.

Some of those involved in the transition, most particularly in these early days, insisted that “quality” did not matter. A body is a body, after all, and what mattered most was filling boots. Others, those who would win the day, argued that modern warfare requires soldiers of above-average mental capacity and the sort of day-to-day discipline shown by completing a high school degree. Army studies, over time, found that those who fell into the bottom of CAT IV were very difficult to train for even basic technical tasks; ultimately, only about one-third of such recruits were capable of the basic tasks expected in the modern army. Such concerns, however, were subsumed in political debate. The White House, aware that the army was not wholeheartedly enthusiastic about the move to an AVF, claimed that discussions of quality were simply an attempt to sabotage the volunteer force. And the Department of Defense dismissed army concerns: “how many Vietcong have PhDs?” was the slightly contemptuous phrasing.

Concern about quality was complicated by the fact that African Americans were significantly more likely than whites to fall into the “low-quality” category. Virtually everyone involved in the discussion pointed to socioeco-

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21 For a more complete discussion of “quality” and market forces, see Bailey, America’s Army, pp. 88-129.
22 Griffith, The US Army’s Transition to the All-Volunteer Force, pp. 186-188; George Doust, interview by Robert K. Griffith, 30 March 1983, AVA-MHI.
nomic explanations: inferior schools, disadvantaged backgrounds – but, in that era of powerful racial division, all discussions of quality were shadowed by the explosive topic of race. When, in the mid-1970s, Bo Callaway, who served as Nixon’s and Gerald R. Ford’s secretary of the army, attempted to raise the quality of army recruits by mandating higher cut-offs across racial lines, opponents charged that he was trying to limit the number of black soldiers. The next secretary of the army, Clifford Alexander, agreed. He insisted that the army’s measure of quality – the high school diploma and a I-III A AFQT score – was unnecessary and prejudicial, and he had the scores removed from the files of 400,000 soldiers in order to prevent their “abuse”.23 (The scores did indeed shape soldiers’ careers, helping to determine not only initial MOS but also the course of promotion and advancement.)

Alexander argued that the army should measure individual accomplishment and success rather than relying on such scores, as they predicted success or failure only in the aggregate and so ruled out many potentially successful soldiers. Army proponents conceded his point, but argued for efficiency. One thousand recruits with high school diplomas yielded 940 soldiers at the end of six months. It took 1,400 recruits without earned high school diplomas to yield the same number of soldiers.24

Despite all the debate, the labor market was functioning: individuals were making decisions, weighing the army against other forms of labor. Some of their decisions were economically rational. Although Congress had increased military pay rates to equal those of basic entry-level civilian jobs in 1973, wages did not keep pace with inflation or the civilian scale and became steadily less competitive over the course of the decade. Cultural and ideological reasons also played a role; antimilitarism did not disappear with the end of the war in Vietnam.

By the end of the 1970s, the all-volunteer free-market army was in crisis. Forty-one per cent of the army’s enlisted ranks were high school dropouts. According to a study done in 1976 at Fort Benning, site of army basic training, 53 per cent of men read at or below fifth-grade level (roughly age ten). The army began rewriting training manuals, moving from eleventh- to seventh-grade reading level, and then to comic books. The American press reported to US citizens and other interested observers around the world that 90 per cent of nuclear-weapons maintenance specialists had failed

their qualification tests in 1978, as had 82 per cent of Hawk surface-to-air missile crews. As a June 1980 cover story in *Time* magazine noted, falling capabilities fit poorly with the rising complexity of weaponry: the modern Blackhawk helicopter, for example, had “257 knobs and switches, 135 circuit breakers, 62 displays and 11.7 sq. feet of instruments and controls”. At the same time, social problems undermined discipline and capability. Crime was rampant, drugs and alcohol abuse endemic, desertion common. Faith in the AVF, never strong, plummeted. In 1978 an American television network ran a documentary titled “The American Army: A Shocking Case of Incompetence”. 25

What seemed like domestic debates about the success or failure of the AVF took on new weight in 1979, when Iranian protesters overran the US embassy in Tehran, taking hostages, and the eventual military rescue mission failed, leaving eight US servicemen dead. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on Christmas Eve 1979 added new pressures. In the midst of international turmoil, with the clear possibility of military action, stories of a military in crisis had new resonance. In the face of such international instability and widespread concern about the quality of the US military, President Jimmy Carter asked Congress to reinstate registration for the draft. He was not proposing an end to the military’s all-volunteer status, but wanted the draft mechanism in place in case it was needed.

As the turn to the labor market initially left the army in a crisis of quality, it also fundamentally changed its composition. The selective service system had mechanisms that could be used to create a roughly proportional representation by race; the new AVF did not. Very quickly, the percentage of African American men began to rise. Black men who had suffered in a civilian job market characterized by racial discrimination found opportunity in the military, and that opportunity was, in part, due to the functioning of the labor market. In the initial years of the AVF the army could not attract enough well-qualified men, and African American men (who were, in aggregate, less likely to be well educated and otherwise competitive in the civilian job market) took advantage of the disparity in supply and demand. And, in various ways, the army encouraged black enlistment. An army recruiting ad that ran in *Ebony*, a popular magazine aimed at African Americans, read: “It’s tough to get ahead when you start so far behind. No skills. No experience. No jobs to look forward to, except the ones anyone

can do.” By 1974, 30 per cent of new accessions were black, compared to slightly over 11 per cent of the US population. Many of them were men who could find no other jobs, and a high percentage of black volunteers were designated “low-quality”. Those recruits did not qualify for technical MOSs or for any field that required significant advanced training. Thus a disproportionate number of African American volunteers were allocated to the combat arms.

It is not surprising that critics claimed exploitation. African American men had died in disproportionate numbers during the early years of the Vietnam War, and even after the Pentagon attempted to make certain that black soldiers were not overrepresented on the front lines, the language of “cannon fodder” and “genocide” persisted. These were, as well, days of racial division and anger both in the United States and in its military. Charlie Rangel, the congressman who would continue to argue against the AVF through the first decade of the twenty-first century, claimed that the all-volunteer force was simply conscription by another name, the drafting of the poor and black under the language of choice.

What is more surprising is the counterargument, which found legitimacy in the army’s attempt to reposition itself during the transition to an AVF. The key spokesman for this position was Ron Dellums, an African American former marine with an MA in social work from the University of California, Berkeley, who was elected to the US Congress on an antiwar platform in 1970. What, he asked, if the army really was, as it claimed, about opportunity? What if there were no war? What if the army did offer good, steady jobs? Should African Americans not have equal access to them? Should African Americans not, finally, have equal opportunity? These were difficult conversations, especially in conjunction with concerns about quality. During the 1980s and 1990s, as overall “quality” numbers rose dramatically, African Americans (both male and female) continued to enlist in disproportionate numbers. During the 1990s, however, 59 per cent of African American recruits scored in the upper half of exam results (CAT IIIA or higher). These “high-quality” recruits had options, both within the military and outside it, and disproportionately few chose combat arms.

26 Advertisement in Ebony, December 1972.
28 Dellums, Lying Down with Lions; Dellums’s 1974 correspondence in Rostker, I Want You!, accompanying CD (G0548.pdf).
29 Moskos and Butler, All That We Can Be, pp. 39-40.
The changing racial demographics of the army during this time of transition concerned many Americans. But the change in racial demographics required much less management than did the growth in the number of women. The shift from conscription-based to all-volunteer military had an enormous impact on women in the military, both their numbers and functions. Of course activists in the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s played a significant role in creating new opportunities for women in the military, as they insisted that women deserved equal rights and opportunities and mounted legal challenges support their claims. But it was the move to the labor market that jumpstarted the full integration of women into the United States’ armed forces. The President’s Commission on the All-Volunteer Force, in a case of extreme short-sightedness, had not factored women into any of its quantitative market calculations about the feasibility of filling the ranks (aside from a proposal to dispense with women altogether), but army planners quickly understood that the army would have to increase the percentage of women in the army in order to meet recruiting goals.

This would be a major transformation. According to legislation passed in 1948, women could not comprise more than 2 per cent of the nation’s military. That limit had been dropped in 1967, but its legacy remained: in 1971, women made up only 1.3 per cent of the military’s enlisted ranks. When the US Army moved to all-volunteer status in 1973, women were still members of a separate “Women’s Army Corps”. Women could not hold a permanent rank higher than Lt. Colonel. Pregnancy brought mandatory discharge. Married women could not enlist (though women could marry while in the service), nor could women with children under the age of eighteen. Women were restricted to just over one-third of military occupational specialties (MOS), but fewer than 1.5 per cent of actual army positions were open to women.

From 1971 to 1979, army enlisted ranks moved from 1.2 per cent female to 8.4 per cent female (for the entire military, figures were 1.3 to 7.6 per...
cent). This shift mirrored changes taking place in American society, as economic crises propelled more women into the workforce and a powerful women’s movement challenged traditional limits on women’s public and workplace roles. But the rapid growth of women in the armed forces was also a byproduct of the shift from powerful cultural traditions of military service to the structural imperatives of labor-market capitalism.

As the army relied increasingly on women, it had to reconsider the roles women were allowed to play. In 1972, the army ended restrictions on all MOSs except combat arms. However, as the civilian labor market had done until the practice was outlawed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the army continued to designate each position – not only general job categories but individual slots – by gender: M, F, or I (for interchangeable). In 1973, under structural pressure, the army began reevaluating the gender designation for each of the individual slots.33 Realizing that if the army needed women who wanted to repair trucks it likely should not advertise for women who were concerned about their “femininity”, the recruiting command also recast recruiting ads. By the late 1970s they emphasized equal opportunity; in the early 1980s ads portrayed women as members of the team, with no gender-specific pitch.

Congress ruled that the first women would be admitted to the US military academies in 1976, and the Women’s Army Corps was dissolved in 1978. However, when the nation reinstated draft registration in 1980, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979, Congress excluded women from registration, a decision that the US Supreme Court endorsed in 1981. According to the Supreme Court, the purpose of the draft was to fill the ranks of combat troops, and as women were not allowed to join the combat arms there was thus no purpose in registering them for the draft.

Stabilizing the all-volunteer force

Many of the arguments that swirled around the all-volunteer army in its early days hinged on its uneasy relationship to the labor market. Was the military analogous to an employer, its members akin to workers? Or was the military exceptional (because it was responsible for the defense of the nation), unbound by either labor law or the rule of the market? The army itself had helped to create the ambiguity. Army recruiting advertisements

offered “good, steady jobs”. Reformers within the ranks frequently compared army privates to civilian employees, urging that the men of the US Army be allowed the freedom to behave responsibly, turning up on time to their jobs each morning just as civilian workers do. At the same time, army noncommissioned officers and officers expected levels of authority and obedience that extended well beyond those demanded of civilian workers, and recruits were often unhappy that what had been portrayed as a job (or an “opportunity”) was, in fact, still the army.

Given these challenges – of recruiting sufficient numbers, of securing volunteers who could make successful soldiers, of managing a fundamental change in the makeup of the force, of dealing with the fact that calling military service a “good job” did not negate the fact that it was still the military, of dealing with international challenges – how did the AVF persist? Why, given the multiple failures of the fledgling AVF, did the United States not return to the draft?

Largely, I would argue, this was because there was no political will or powerful immediate threat. Nothing is ever monocausal, of course, and it is important to acknowledge the new patriotism of Reagan’s America and the waning shadow of the war in Vietnam. Military funding grew during the 1980s, and the army instituted internal reforms, including a new econometric, computer-based system of recruiting. But market forces also played a role, both labor-market forces of supply and demand and the cultural-consumer marketplace of meaning. Perhaps the most important factor was a change in demand. Congress lowered the target enlisted strength of the army – most dramatically after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 – and as the army needed fewer soldiers, it raised its standards for admission. Not surprisingly, quality begat quality. Army rebranding mattered, as well: this version of the army offered to help American youth “Be All You Can Be”.

Targeted benefits were also critically important. College benefits not only drew more highly qualified recruits; they also helped to rebrand the army. Army researchers had discovered, in the early 1980s, that the biggest disincentive to enlistment was a potential volunteer’s mother. Mothers evidently equated military enlistment with failure; success, to them, was college enrollment. This research gave the army’s deputy chief of staff for personnel (DCSPER) a brilliant idea: link the army to college; make army enlistment the path to college enrollment; transform those mothers’ concerns into pride. In all fairness, the army advocated ceaselessly for the new GI Bill that was instituted in the mid-1980s, and in 2010 the army spent $220 million on higher-education assistance for active-duty soldiers. But as much as the DCSPER cared about the actual education benefits his
soldiers might receive, he meant to use the promise of education to help rebrand the army. And instead of competing with colleges for young men and women, the military would offer higher education as an earned benefit of military service.\textsuperscript{34}

During this same period, the army began a large new program of family benefits. The army did not do so to draw more soldiers with dependants, though that was the consequence. Instead, family benefits were deemed necessary to retain soldiers. This is the logic: a conscription-based force relies on a reenlistment rate of about 10 per cent; an AVF, manpower analysts projected, would require almost 50 per cent of its personnel to reenlist. And researchers, trying to understand reenlistment decisions, discovered that it most often came down to a single question: is my family happy?\textsuperscript{35}

The move to an AVF had transformed the demographics of the army in ways that went beyond gender and race; the new volunteers were more often older (the current maximum age of enlistment is forty-two; the average age is twenty-one), more often married, more often parents. But the military made little provision for dependants; “if the Army wanted you to have a family it would have issued you one”, as the saying used to go. Spouses (mostly wives) and children were often frustrated and unhappy, and good soldiers thus too often faced a choice: family or career. The army’s solution was a broad new program of family-oriented benefits: excellent child-care programs, dental care, and excellent medical coverage; recreation services; psychological counseling; even subsidies for relocating family pets. Such programs made the stark family-or-military decisions ever less likely. But they accelerated the transformation of army demographics. Excellent family benefits drew more men and women with families to enlist; excellent family benefits kept more soldiers with families in the army. There are now 1.5 army dependants for every active duty member of the army. In 2010 47 per cent of soldiers had dependent children, 72 per cent of them under the age of eleven.\textsuperscript{36} This demographic shift has significant implications in those instances when the “job” becomes deployment to a war zone, and is a significant piece of the debate about labor markets, workplaces, and military exceptionalism.

\textsuperscript{34} Alan Ono, interview by author, 29 July 2005, Honolulu, HI.
\textsuperscript{36} For statistics, see Army Posture Statements, www.army.mil.
By the late 1980s the military's downward trend had been decidedly reversed. The army was no longer in crisis; politicians and pundits and military officers declared the all-volunteer army a success. The navy and marines offered similar success stories, though neither had suffered quite so much as had the army in the transition. (The air force was largely exempt from the problems the other services faced in the initial decade of the AVF, as it remained quite competitive throughout the transition.) After a rocky beginning, the military had learned to maneuver successfully in the market system. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that the military was, in fact, still protected from the labor-market laws of supply and demand. It could compete in the market because it was underwritten by the state—by rising military budgets funded by American taxpayers and citizens.

Despite the success of the all-volunteer force, tensions remained between labor and military models. These tensions came into stark conflict in 2003 as the United States went to war in Iraq. During the 1990s, army recruiting had tried to distance itself from war. When a New York Times reporter suggested that the army’s success in the Persian Gulf War (1990-1991) must be great for recruiting, the Recruiting Command's director of advertising disagreed. “We don't want to be misleading”, he said, “but too much combat footage interferes with the long-term attributes of army service that we want to portray: money for college, skills training and relevance to a civilian career.”

Of course, army leaders always understood that the mission of the US Army is to preserve the peace, a mission they understand first as deterring armed violence and second as, when deemed necessary by civilian leaders, fighting and winning the nation’s wars. But the all-volunteer army had, quite purposely, played down prospects of war and of combat. It had portrayed itself as a site of employment, as a source of opportunity. Young men and women who joined the army in the pre-Iraq War years knew, on some level, that the global situation might change, that they might well be deployed. But some of those who joined the Army Reserve on the promise of “One Weekend a Month”, or who enlisted in the active ranks drawn by promises of money for college were understandably upset by what they saw as a bait-and-switch.

In the early months of the war in Iraq General Eric Shinseki, chief of staff of the army, directed the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) to define a “warrior ethos”. Driven in part by the conditions of combat in

38 Bailey, America’s Army, pp. 245, 247.
Iraq and the recent death of eleven soldiers and capture of twenty-year-old maintenance clerk Jessica Lynch and her five companions in an attack on their convoy, the TRADOC task force concluded that all soldiers, no matter what their MOS or gender, had to be prepared for combat. The army replaced the Soldier’s Creed that had been adopted in the years after the Vietnam War with one that emphasized the Warrior Ethos. The new creed replaced the initial phrase, “I am a member of the United States Army”, with “I am a Warrior and a member of a team.” In the early twenty-first century, key army leaders were attempting to counter the notion that soldiering was a job.\(^{39}\)

**Key variables: the all-volunteer force in the United States**

The United States traditionally relied on some form of a volunteer force, turning to conscription only during major wars. Between the end of World War II and the Vietnam War, the military expected to fill its ranks largely with volunteers, drafting only enough additional men to reach accessions goals for each service. A relatively small percentage of those who served were draftees during these years, with the exception of the Korean War. In 1949, for example, volunteers were sufficient to fill the ranks; not a single man was drafted. Still, it is important to distinguish between “true” volunteers and draft-motivated volunteers, or men who enlisted because they expected to be drafted and knew they would have more control over their assignments and prospects if, instead, they volunteered for service. Although it is difficult to collect such data with precision, army researchers concluded that 49.7 per cent of volunteers in 1969, during the Vietnam War, were draft-motivated.\(^{40}\)

While individuals face no compulsion to join or serve in the US military, once enlisted, members of the military are subject to specific legal constraints. Most fundamentally, enlistment changes the recruit’s status from individual, able to enter freely into contract, to servicemember, bound by the regulations of the US military. In 1890, in its decision *In re Grimley*, the US Supreme Court ruled that “enlistment is a contract, but it is one of those contracts which changes the status, and where that is changed, no breach of the contract destroys the new status or relieves from the obligations which its existence imposes”. To clarify, the justices offered the analogy

\(^{39}\) Ibid., pp. 248-249.

of marriage. While the “contract obligations” of marriage include “mutual faithfulness, […] a breach of those obligations does not destroy the status or change the relation of the parties to each other”.41

For example, in 1978 Captain Leon T. Davis, a thirty-year-old radiologist, faced court-martial for desertion after he refused to take his assignment in Korea. Captain Davis argued that, in a volunteer force, military service was based on a two-way contract. He had joined the army, he testified, based on promises made by recruiters and by army advertising, most particularly the claim that army doctors would have modern, state-of-the-art medical equipment. Because that was untrue the army was in breach of contract and he was thus “legally and morally excused” from filling his contractual obligations. Captain Davis was court-martialed, though a $2,000 fine replaced the potential sentence of eight and a half years of hard labor. The military court decision was based on In re Grimley: the contractual act of enlistment had transformed Leon Davis from an individual into a soldier and, once his status changed, no breach of contract could destroy his new status or relieve him of the obligations it carried. That decision, obviously, brings into relief the difference between military service and civilian employment.42

A second legal constraint on military service as free labor is the practice of “stop loss”. Stop loss is the involuntary extension of an individual’s active duty service beyond the specified initial term of service, which may be up to the contractual end of obligated service (eight years). The policy, which was created by Congress after the end of US involvement in the war in Vietnam, is based on Title 10, United States Code, Section 12305(a): “the President may suspend any provision of law relating to promotion, retirement, or separation applicable to any member of the armed forces who the President determines is essential to the national security of the United States”.43 The standard Armed Forces enlistment contract includes the following statement: “In a time of war, my enlistment may be extended without my consent for the duration of the war and for six months after its end (10 U.S.C. 506, 12103(c)).”44 Stop loss has been used during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, primarily to extend when the soldier’s unit is to deploy

41 For complete text of decision, see Justia.com.
43 For this regulation, see http://us-code.vlex.com/source/us-code-armed-forces-1009 (accessed January 2012).
within ninety days of his or her end of initial enlistment. According to the army, 58,300 soldiers were affected by stop loss between 2002 and 2008.45

Stop loss is invoked in unusual circumstances. In most cases, individuals serve an agreed-upon term. Duration of service varies, as branches of the armed forces offer different enlistment options at different points in time based upon the recruiting market and the mix of immediate and longer-term military needs. One argument in favor of the volunteer force, which typically requires longer periods of enlistment than those mandated by the draft (ranging from twenty-one to twenty-four months in the post-World War II era), is that longer periods of training and experience are necessary to master increasingly sophisticated military technology. Most current enlistments in the military are for three or four years, although those who have served are contractually obligated for eight years and maintain “individual ready reserve” status, in which they have no military obligations but may be called up during the balance of that time, as in the stop-loss policy described above.

Military pay in the United States is linked to civilian pay. Until 2006, military pay raises were at least 0.5 per cent higher than each year’s civilian pay raise, as calculated by the Employment Cost Index (ECI). Since 2007, military pay is automatically raised to equal the ECI increase, but may exceed that figure if so authorized by Congress. Military pay follows a carefully calibrated system of pay grades, based on a combination of rank and seniority, which are consistent across all services. Enlisted ranks range from E-1 (private, airman basic, or seaman recruit) through E-9 (equivalent ranks to army sergeant major through sergeant major of the army); warrant officers, which only exist in some services, run W-1 through W-5; officer ranks from O-1 (second lieutenant/ensign) through O-10 (general/admiral). In 2011, pay for E-1 was $1,467.60 per month. Members of the US military also receive benefits, including health care for self and dependants, housing allowances (where applicable), clothing allowance, family-separation allowance, access to lower-cost goods on post, and various forms of incentive and special pay, including that for hazardous duty.

The AVF is based on free labor, although the choice to enlist is, obviously, not made in a vacuum, and critics have, at various times, charged that the AVF replaced the selective service system with an economic draft. Civilian designers of the American all-volunteer force intended for the military to compete in a national labor market and called frequently on principles of free labor as they discussed the shape of the force. Willing or not, the

military has since designed recruiting strategies for labor-market competition, although most who shape such campaigns understand that more is involved in the decision to enlist than the rational economic interests of potential recruits. While I doubt many of those serving in the US military think of his or her service in these terms, an all-volunteer force would fall on the “commodified labor” end of the axis.

**Major factors contributing to the emergence and persistence of the US all-volunteer force**

Many factors contributed to the United States’ decision to move from a conscription-based to an all-volunteer force. To turn to cliché, a perfect storm of opposition to the draft emerged during the late 1960s, creating strange bedfellows as right and left joined in opposition to the draft. Despite the wide range of factors that undermined the draft, the two most important were demographic and ideological.

Demographic change in the US population was perhaps the most important factor behind the move from conscription-based to all-volunteer force. Between 1964 and 1973, the front end of the baby boom came of age. Close to 27 million young men entered the draft pool during those years, the largest cohort of men between eighteen and twenty-five before or since. Only 2.7 million of them would serve in Vietnam, fewer still in combat.

Over the course of the war in Vietnam Americans came to believe – accurately – that the selective service system was unfair and inequitable, allowing those with resources to escape its reach. Historian Christian Appy calls Vietnam “the working-class war”, and class undeniably played a powerful role in predicting which young men would be drafted. Those from relatively well-off families were more often able to find a sympathetic doctor who would provide documentation for a medical exemption. Higher education, paid for by individual students or their families rather than by the state, was grounds for deferment and, in 1966, only 6 per cent of those serving in Vietnam had college degrees. (The percentage rose to 10 by 1970, with the end of exemptions for graduate students and teachers.) African Americans were more likely to be drafted than whites, more likely to be put into the infantry, and, in the early years of the war, disproportionately likely to die. Black Americans overwhelmingly believed that the toll of the war
fell most heavily on their sons, even though military policies had lowered black casualty rates by the late 1960s. 46

The larger point, however, is that there were vastly more young men than the military required, even at the height of the Vietnam War, and the military continued to rely on deferments to manage that oversupply. (It moved to a lottery system with more limited deferments for 1970 summons.) However, the deferments that had seemed relatively innocuous during times of peace had much greater stakes in an era when a draft notice likely meant deployment to Vietnam. As draft calls rose and more and more young American men died on foreign soil, the selective service system seemed less and less fair.

Many Americans wanted to end the draft because they believed the United States’ selective service system was unfair. That belief, ultimately, was due to demographic factors. Because there were so many more young men of draft age than were required for military service, most particularly for combat in Vietnam, risk and sacrifice were, by definition, not fairly shared. Most young men worried about their draft status, but a relatively small percentage of them were conscripted, and a relatively small percentage of those fought in Vietnam. World War II, in contrast, had disrupted the lives of almost all the nation’s citizens, with virtually every able-bodied young man serving in the military or doing “essential” defense work. The children of the president of the United States, along with large numbers of students from Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, served in the military along with the sons of struggling hourly workers and middle-class shopkeepers and small farmers. And throughout World War II, despite the much greater loss of life, Americans had confidence in the selective service system. In 1942 93 per cent believed the draft operated fairly; in May 1945 the system still had the confidence of 79 per cent.47 That was not true during the Vietnam War.

The demographically created inequities helped to discredit the US selective service system, but ideological and political objections were also critical to the creation of the all-volunteer force. Proposals to replace the draft with voluntary service came from all parts of the political spectrum. First of all, President Nixon’s proposal to end the draft was a calculated political move intended to undermine antiwar protest. Antiwar movement leaders had often mobilized opposition to the war by focusing on the draft, and anger over the draft did fuel antiwar protest. Both Johnson and Nixon understood that some part of the antiwar protest was so motivated (though

their focus on the opposition to the draft led them to underestimate the depth and breadth of opposition to the war), and Nixon meant to undercut the antiwar movement by winnowing out some of those who were mainly concerned with the draft. The draft provided an opportunity for action. Perhaps antiwar protest would quiet if the draft were not such an issue.

Those on the left made two key arguments. Many to the left of the political center argued that it would be more difficult for American presidents to engage in military adventurism if they could not rely upon conscription but instead had to convince young people to voluntarily put their lives on the line. Their reasoning, though shown by subsequent events to be flawed, has a certain logic. The president would not be able to send troops to war cavalierly, knowing that the draft would supply however many bodies required. Young Americans would not volunteer for unpopular or illegitimate wars. According to this reasoning, an all-volunteer force would be a check on the nation’s ability to go to war.

Men and women who believed that the United States’ war in Vietnam was illegitimate also questioned the legitimacy of the draft. Why, they asked, could the government compel men to go to war against their will, to kill and to risk death in a war that a majority of their fellow citizens did not support? Revelations that the US government had lied to the American people about the initial reasons for escalation of the war, US wartime actions, and the war’s progress lent strength to such questions and helped to undermine willingness to continue conscription. Widely publicized tales of fragging, alcohol and drug abuse, combat refusal, wartime atrocities, desertion, and other acts of disobedience by US combatants during the war contributed to popular antimilitary sentiment and further undermined support for compulsory military service. Thus the specific war mattered greatly, giving force to political and ideological objections to the draft.

Conservative opposition to the draft was much less focused on the war in Vietnam; conservatives supported American war policies much longer than did the liberal-left. Nonetheless, policy-oriented conservatives and libertarians had long been arguing for the end of conscription. Some conservative proponents of an all-volunteer force presented the draft as a “gross infringement on personal liberty”, while a powerful cohort of free-market economists argued that conscription imposed a “hidden tax” on those who were drafted – an argument that goes back to the demographic. Those who are drafted, according to this argument, lose not only the difference between civilian salaries and low military pay during their legally mandated service, but also delay their further education, apprenticeship, or accumulation of seniority, the benefits of which accrue over time. Those
who escape the draft – a much larger portion of the population and of their peers – are not so penalized.48

These free-market critics of the draft believed that the military should compete in the national labor market and insisted that recruiting would pose no difficulty if military compensation matched entry-level civilian pay and benefits. Martin Anderson, the man who convinced Nixon to make his pledge to end the draft, was a junior player in this world. Nixon, in fact, used such language in his 1968 radio address: the armed forces, he explained, were the “only employers today who don’t have to compete in the job market [...]. They’ve been able to ignore the laws of supply and demand.” Higher pay and increased benefits, Nixon claimed, would make military jobs “more competitive with the attractions of the civilian world” and the all-volunteer force a possibility.49

Finally, changes in military technology and doctrine played a role. Echoing Eisenhower, Nixon told the nation in 1968 that in a nuclear age “huge ground armies operating in massive formations would be terribly vulnerable”, and thus the nation needed a smaller number of “motivated men” with the “higher level of technical and professional skill” necessary to operate the “complex weapons of modern war”.50 Nixon’s claim may have been disingenuous, but changes in military technology and doctrine would alter the way the military defined desirable – and acceptable – recruits.

Some of the factors that led to the end of the draft and the creation of the AVF remain critically important to its persistence, while others episodically threaten to undermine it.

Demographics remain significant. While demographic shifts – the baby boom that supplied a large excess of draft-age men – helped make the move to an all-volunteer force feasible, demographics has worked against the AVF in more recent decades. At the height of the baby boom in 1957, the US birth-rate was 25.3 (per 1,000 population); by 1973 it had fallen to 14.9. Of course overall population had increased, so the drop in numbers is not so extreme as the more than 40 per cent decline in birthrate might suggest. Nonetheless, births dropped from a high of 4,308,000 in 1957 to 3,136,965 in 1973, or roughly 27 per cent. Put in other terms, the US fertility rate hit a twentieth-century high of 3.8 per cent in 1957, declining to 1.7 per cent in 1976. It did not again reach replacement rate (2.0) until 2007. The US military’s overall recruitment goal for 1974 was just under 428,000. That figure declined steadily over the

48 For a detailed discussion of the “hidden tax”, complete with primary documents, see Rostker, I Want You!, pp. 113-120.
50 Ibid.
following years, especially rapidly in the post-Cold War era. Recruitment
targets for the US military were approximately 292,000 in 1989; they were
down to 200,000 in 1992, and only 181,000 in 2004. Army recruitment goals, in
parallel, were 211,600 (1974); 119,875 (1989); 75,000 (1992); and 77,000 (2004). (It
is important to note that these goals are only for active-duty enlisted troops
and include both nonprior service and reenlistment.)

The army obviously found it much easier to recruit 75,000 volunteers a year than 211,000.

A significant number of these military volunteers are not US citizens. In
recent years the US immigration rate, both legal and nondocumented, has
accounted for a greater percentage of American population growth than
does its birthrate. As of 2006, 40,000 noncitizens served in the US military,
with approximately 8,000 resident aliens enlisting for active duty each
year. By law, enlistees must be legally in the United States and hold a green
card, which is evidence that the holder may be legally employed. President
George W. Bush signed an executive order allowing noncitizens to apply
for citizenship following a single day of active service in the US military,
and as of 2006 25,000 men and women have applied for and been granted
US citizenship through military service. The “Dream Act”, a bipartisan
congressional effort targeted at the approximately 65,000 young people
without legal status in the United States who graduate from American
high schools each year, would offer a six-year path to citizenship based
on earning a college diploma or serving for four years in the US military.

While the military requires a relatively small percentage of draft-age
youth, military enlistment standards combine with labor-market pressures
to create ongoing struggles to fill the ranks. In the contemporary United
States, the military is definitely not an employer of last resort. Seven out of
ten young Americans do not meet the standards for military enlistment. Of
the 31.2 million Americans between the ages of seventeen and twenty-four,
only 4.7 million are considered “qualified military available”, and only 1.6
million are in the army’s target market: young men and women between
the ages of seventeen and twenty-four, with earned high school degrees, in
good physical condition, capable of scoring in the top half of the military
qualification exam, and without criminal records.

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53 For an overview of ineligibility, see William H. McMichael, “Most US Youth Unfit to Serve, Data Show”, Army Times, 3 November 2009.
The US military competes with colleges and universities and with civilian employers for the more able of American youth. As of October 2009, 70.1 per cent of those who graduated from high school in spring 2009 were attending college or university.\(^54\) While a great many young people do not graduate from high school, they fall outside the military recruitment target market. In 2007, for example, despite recruiting pressures during two unpopular wars, only 1.4 per cent of enlisted recruits had not graduated from high school or earned a GED. That contrasts with 20.8 per cent of all Americans aged eighteen to twenty-four.\(^55\)

Other criteria rule out a great number of potential volunteers. At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, approximately 17 per cent of Americans in the target age group are significantly overweight or obese. Significant numbers used prescription drugs that disqualified them from service. And until 2011, although gay men and women who volunteered for military service were not prohibited from joining or questioned about sexual orientation upon enlistment, they were not allowed to serve openly and risked discharge upon discovery. Approximately 13,000 men and women were discharged from the military under the provisions of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” between 1994 and 2011.\(^56\) Thus, the reduction of total end strength has made it possible to fill the ranks despite the shrinking pool of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds, but high admissions criteria make that task more challenging than numbers alone would suggest.

One of the predicted drawbacks of a volunteer force was its cost, and the high costs of recruiting and maintaining an all-volunteer force work against its persistence. The AVF is enormously expensive. Obviously much of the US military budget is driven by high-cost weapons systems, the global presence of the US military, and the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But the labor-market military has added extraordinary new costs. According to the Congressional Budget Office, basic pay for lower-ranked enlisted troops

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doubled between 1971 (two years before the AVF began) and 1975 (two years after it began), when adjusted for inflation. The US General Accounting Office estimated that the AVF added approximately $3 billion a year to the military’s 1974 budget (more than $10 billion in 2006 dollars). Those who argued that the draft imposed a hidden tax on draftees see that figure as evidence of the scale of the tax imposed. Others make the point that this is not necessarily a cost of an all-volunteer force, as draftees should be paid at reasonably competitive civilian rates.57

Not only does labor-market competition require higher salaries and significant nonpay benefits, initial costs of recruiting have risen steadily over the decades. Estimates vary depending on what categories are included, but it is safe to say that the army currently spends close to $25,000 to recruit each nonprior service volunteer. Through most of the war in Iraq it took 7,500 recruiters and a budget of millions of dollars each year to convince about 80,000 nonprior service volunteers to join the army. The army offered large bonuses: its budget for fiscal year 2011 included $465 million as bonuses for new recruits.58 An NPS recruit could qualify for a “quick ship” bonus of $20,000 by reporting for duty within thirty days of enlisting, and those qualifying for high-demand MOSs got up to $40,000 for a four-year enlistment. Reenlistment bonuses were also common, and with private security contractors offering to pay up to $200,000 a year for the best former special operations troops, the army (very rarely) offered reenlistment bonuses of up to $150,000. These financial incentives were combined with college education benefits and student-loan repayment programs.59 The family benefits that were developed both to encourage reenlistment and in recognition of the changing demographics of the army are also extraordinarily costly. The US military counts about 1.4 million on active duty, but its military health system covers 9.6 million people, the majority of them dependants of both active-duty and retired veterans. Pentagon spending on health care has risen from $19 billion in 2001 to a projected $50.7 billion in 2011, in part because of wartime casualties, but also because the military plan is more generous than any potential civilian coverage. In addition, family

support programs cost $8.3 billion a year – which includes childcare spaces for 200,000.60

Economics certainly plays a role in enlistment rates, and thus in the continuation of an AVF. The recession that began in 2009 led to a flood of enlistments, including more and more young people who have completed college. But the AVF is not an economic draft, in that those who come from the poorest, most disadvantaged backgrounds are much less likely to qualify for enlistment: they are less likely to have graduated from high school, more likely to have gotten in trouble with the law, more likely to have physical ailments, from obesity to asthma, and more likely to have gone to inferior schools and thus more likely to score below the cut-off on military entrance exams. The American military is solidly middle-class, if middle-class is defined by the nation’s median household income, which was $50,428 in 2007. At the same time, military recruiting focuses heavily on small towns and rural areas in which capable young people find few employment opportunities, and it is clear that volunteer rates predictably climb with unemployment rates.61

Finally and most fundamentally, war has a profound impact on the health and persistence of the all-volunteer force, whether in the form of military doctrine and war planning or as wars actually fought. “War”, however, is not a generic category; the specific circumstances of each war or conflict are critically important. The Vietnam War made the move to an AVF possible, largely by creating discontent with the selective service system and fostering antimilitary sentiments. But the antimilitary sentiments aroused by the war in Vietnam also made it difficult to recruit quality soldiers and forge a successful volunteer force in that war’s aftermath. The US military’s performance in the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War, despite some problems with mobilization, convinced many skeptics that the AVF was a capable force and quieted the calls for a return to the draft that had begun almost before conscription ended. During the 1990s, the US military was frequently deployed in MOOTW (Military Operations Other Than War), including disaster relief and nation-building or stabilizing efforts. Such efforts continue in Iraq and Afghanistan, and female personnel are increasingly important in interactions with women in sex-segregated societies. New technologies that require experience and maturity more than youthful physical vigor extend the potential age of service, an important consideration in a nation with an aging population.

61 Watkins and Sherk, “Who Serves in the US Military?”
When the United States began its preemptive war in Iraq in 2003, few discussed a draft. This was in part because the Bush administration presented the invasion of Iraq as a brief and easily accomplished task, but also because most Americans had forgotten that the AVF was envisioned as a peacetime core around which a wartime military could be constructed. Even as servicemen and -women were returned for second, third, and fourth tours of Iraq and were compelled to remain in the military past the end of their enlistments by stop-loss provisions, few military or political leaders seriously contemplated returning to the draft.

**Conclusion**

There was from its beginning a tension at the heart of the all-volunteer army. The end of conscription did not change the army’s purpose: the fundamental mission of the US Army is to fight and win the nation’s wars. But the all-volunteer army had, quite purposefully and more powerfully over time, tried to recast the meaning of military service. It downplayed notions of duty and service and obligation; it sold itself to potential recruits and to the broader American public both as a source of opportunity and as a “good job”. And while a great many men and women did find opportunity and stable employment in the army during the decades of relative peace, peace was never guaranteed.

Was it legitimate, critics periodically asked, to sell the army as money for college or as job training or as a source of health coverage for one’s children when those erstwhile students or skilled employees or parents would also be soldiers, subject to orders that override other obligations and other roles, and that might well end their lives? Back in 1978, as the false promises of some army recruiters made news and drew the attention of Congress, recruiters were ordered to give all applicants a written reminder. “The Army is a military organization”, the statement read, “which may be called upon to participate in combat operations (to fight) while you are a member of it.”

One can understand the bitterness of members of the Army Reserve, which had relied for years on the recruiting slogan, “One Weekend a Month”, who in 2003 embellished their Army Reserve truck in Iraq with a sign: “One Weekend a Month, My Ass!”

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What does it mean that the vast majority of Americans remained untouched by war, not even subject to the shared risk of the draft or the obligation of service, while a small volunteer force was sent repeatedly to war during the first decade of the twenty-first century? This is the ultimate but rarely stated problem with an all-volunteer force: the AVF cushions most Americans from the impact of war. By replacing the logic of citizen’s obligation with that of the market and defining soldiering as employment, it excuses citizens from their basic obligation to pay attention to what is done in their name and of acting, as citizens, whether to support or to prevent US military actions.

The solution might be obvious – a return to the draft – but that proposal runs up against hard evidence and firm belief. US military leaders are certain that a volunteer force offers the best means of national defense, at least as they envision current and future conflicts. It takes a fair amount of intellectual competence to be a soldier in today’s army – or to serve in any branch of the military – and it takes a great deal of training. While a no-deferments draft would definitely capture more of the most competent American youth, it would also capture a great many more of the less competent. And drafting young men and women, as a matter of course, for more than a year’s term would be hard to justify. But a one-year stint in the army does not offer time for adequate training on increasingly sophisticated weapons, nor does it allow a new soldier time to develop the necessary experience and instincts to function in complex and rapidly changing operational environments. In addition, as the army learned all too well in the last years of conscription, those who are drafted against their will tend to be much less highly motivated than those who have volunteered.

Two other problems further complicate the notion. Reinstating the draft would create a political storm over women’s roles. Currently, women may enlist in the military but are not required to register for the draft. That policy would certainly be challenged – and few politicians want to contend with that struggle. The demographic issue remains, as well: the military needs but a fraction of the nation’s youth, and a draft that took a small percentage of young men (or young men and women) would, certainly, be intensely unfair. Bottom line: less-able, less-well-trained, less-experienced, less-motivated soldiers are more likely to fail in their missions. And they are more likely to get themselves – and their comrades – killed. While the army had enormous reservations about the move to an all-volunteer force back in the early 1970s, it more strongly opposes the return to the draft today. Thus, despite the various factors that work against the persistence of the all-volunteer force, short of massive, total war, the United States will almost certainly maintain an all-volunteer force.