



Newly commissioned Navy ensigns take oath of office during Naval Academy's Class of 2023 graduation ceremony at Navy-Marine Corps Stadium, Annapolis, Maryland, May 26, 2023 (DOD/Chad J. McNeeley)

Was 50 Years Long Enough?

The All-Volunteer Force in an Era of Large-Scale Combat Operations

By Kent W. Park and John A. Nagl

In an era of geopolitical competition among major powers, a large-scale war could last longer and result in more casualties than anything the United States has experienced since World War II. It is unclear whether the all-volunteer force (AVF) that the

United States has relied on for the past 50 years, with extraordinary and unexpected success, can meet the manpower requirements in quality and quantity and in time to win the large-scale combat operations that the Department of Defense (DOD) is preparing for.

Current U.S. Army doctrine recommends planning for a sustained casualty replacement rate of approximately 800 per day per theater during large-scale combat operations (LSCO).¹ That is 24,000 people per month for one theater. Recent

simulations run by the Army's Mission Command Training Program consistently produced 50,000 to 55,000 casualties in corps- and division-level battles.² In a war game run by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, casualty estimates ranged from around 7,000 to 10,000 in just the initial 3 to 4 weeks of what was primarily a sea and air battle.³

These large casualty estimates are also reflected in the current conflict in Ukraine, with the Russians estimated to have suffered between 290,000 and

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460,000 casualties.⁴ Although accurate numbers are difficult to assess, the best estimate of Ukrainian casualties is around 190,000.⁵ These numbers are from just over 2 years of conflict between two sides that are not near-peers. Although there have been significant battles, the scale falls short of an LSCO. Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines testified to Congress that, based on casualties during the battle of Bakhmut, Russia is unlikely to be able to sustain the current level of offensive operations without mobilizing additional manpower.⁶

These are staggering numbers compared to recent experiences in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, but historically, they are well within the norm for an LSCO against a near-peer adversary. In World War II, Operation *Crusader* (in North Africa in late 1941) is representative of two evenly matched opponents. Fighting in an air-land battle over a 3-week period, the 118,000-strong British Eighth Army suffered 17,700 casualties (15 percent).⁷ The Axis force of 119,000 suffered 38,300 casualties (32 percent).⁸ The scale of forces engaged is likely comparable to a modern-day, large-scale ground combat between two near-peer adversaries. For an example of sustained casualty rates over longer periods, one can look at the U.S. 80th Division—a typical combat division that fought in the European theater during World War II. Over a 9-month period, the 80th Division replaced nearly 70 percent of its personnel, some 10,000 Soldiers.⁹

We must also consider manpower and replacement rates within the broader context of total mobilization. During World War I, the United States mobilized 4.6 percent of its total population,¹⁰ while the average mobilization rate for the major belligerents of Germany, Russia, France, and the United Kingdom was 15.5 percent of the total population.¹¹ During World War II, the United States mobilized around 12 percent of the population against an average of 17.8 percent across the major belligerents.¹²

To put this into modern context, with a current U.S. population of approximately 336 million, a 15-percent mobilization would mean a U.S. military

of 50.4 million.¹³ The current size of the U.S. military, including the National Guard and Reserve, is about 2.2 million, or less than 1 percent of the population. World War I-level mobilizations for the United States would require quadrupling the current force; for a World War II-level force, the military would have to grow to *more than 10 times the current size* of the all-volunteer force.

It would be irresponsible to use one of these estimates to forecast future manpower requirements, but it would be equally irresponsible and potentially dangerous to ignore them. World War I- or World War II-type industrial warfare may constitute a worst-case scenario, but we cannot discount the possibility, even using modern-day simulations, that the United States will quickly exhaust the current AVF in an LSCO. As a result, although the United States does not necessarily need a large standing Army during peacetime, it must have the capacity to grow and sustain the force for a prolonged period in a projected LSCO. Moreover, although other Services will require additional manpower in large-scale combat operations, the Army historically consumes some 80 percent of drafted personnel, according to the Selective Service System. This is overwhelmingly an Army problem, with huge implications for the joint force.

Current System

In 1973, the Gates Commission recommended transitioning to an AVF, stating that “the nation’s best interests will be better served by an all-volunteer force, *supported by an effective standby draft*.”¹⁴ The AVF was never meant to operate on its own, especially during a large-scale war. It was designed to buy time while the Nation got on a war footing to start scaling up manpower through the draft. The current state of the AVF, with its sustained recruiting challenges, complicates serious manpower planning for an LSCO. It is important to emphasize, though, that even without the current recruitment challenges, the need for a draft in a large-scale war remains. The math problem does not go away.

The United States currently has a military accession system with two paths to generate manpower. They are the AVF and conscription (the “draft”) through Selective Service. Due to the time it takes to draft and train new recruits, the Army maintains the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) to provide additional manpower relatively quickly in the event of large-scale conflict. The IRR consists of Soldiers who decide to leave the Army but are still obligated to serve if recalled in case of an emergency. They are the pre-trained military manpower the Army plans to use to quickly bring Active and Reserve units to wartime strength.¹⁵ These same Soldiers will also deploy to serve as initial casualty replacements.¹⁶

The Army—the largest consumer of manpower of the military Services and the one with the greatest recruiting challenge—is representative. The Navy and Air Force are also facing serious consequences of being unable to recruit enough troops. The absence in the ranks of the roughly 30,000 Soldiers that the Army was unable to recruit into the military in 2022 and 2023 is having a first-order effect in the Service right now, with units having fewer Soldiers to perform tasks. In 5 to 10 years, the Army will experience the second-order effect of not having many of those 30,000 trained military personnel in the IRR. This has serious implications for readiness for an LSCO.

When the IRR was instituted in 1973, it consisted of over 700,000 former military personnel who could be recalled in the event of an emergency.¹⁷ In 2022, this number was approximately 76,000.¹⁸ Out of this number, the estimated yield of personnel could be as low as 10 percent; a 2020 report from the Reserve Forces Policy Board stated: “Multiple individuals are normally required for call-up to source a single set of orders (sometimes as many as eight to ten notifications for every one billet filled) as many are unable to execute orders due to medical issues, poor physical fitness, inability to locate them, or other disqualifiers.”¹⁹ This means that potentially 7,600 veterans are all that stand between a major war and the resumption of the draft.

The National Guard and its 27 brigade combat teams (BCTs) are not in any better shape. On paper, they are at around 98 percent manning.²⁰ However, these teams have Soldiers in billets who are not ready to deploy.²¹ Other than the Crisis Response Force, the National Guard's BCTs are generally around 60 to 65 percent deployable strength.²² And that is just manning; when also considering equipment and training readiness, some units are in far worse shape.

The key takeaway is that the United States is much closer to needing the draft than most people realize. The IRR, the National Guard, and other Reserve Components that make up the strategic reserve for the U.S. military were designed to buy our Nation some time to prepare and get on a war footing. This would also give political leaders a chance to have a national dialogue and ensure that the American public supports the reinstatement of the draft. Unfortunately, the strategic reserve is currently insufficient to hold the line and create any significant time and space for the Nation. Any delay in reinstating the draft would likely result in significantly higher risk for military commanders and could even result in a more prolonged war.

Faulty Assumptions

This problem has not received the attention it deserves, mostly because of wishful thinking and faulty assumptions. First among equals is the faulty assumption that the U.S. military will be able to fight the next major war entirely with the AVF. This stems from America's long-held desire for short and decisive wars, but history has repeatedly proved this wish to be unattainable.²³ There are few scenarios in which a major war against China or Russia would end quickly with minimal casualties.

The second faulty assumption is that the U.S. Government will be able to reauthorize the draft without significant political and societal repercussions. However, while legal authority and historical artifacts exist from before 1973, there is little institutional knowledge or experience on how to conduct a draft should it once again be needed. In addition, just as

the strategic environment has changed in the past 50 years, American politics and society have changed significantly, but our conscription system has not kept pace.

The third faulty assumption is that a large-scale war against a near-peer threat is a high-impact, low-probability event and that the United States can assume some risk. However, that is not what the U.S. military is doing. In our public statements and in our investments in new ships, bombers, and hypersonic missiles, the U.S. military is posturing and preparing as if a large-scale war is a real possibility.²⁴ The military is preparing weapons and materials for major war but is ignoring its inability to tap into the strategic manpower reserve that would be required to employ those weapons systems.

There is not one single person or agency responsible for all these assumptions, and no official documents are available that point them out. But the problem will not go away just because we ignore it, and it is past time to confront it head-on.

Supply and Demand

The biggest challenge to total mobilization is that neither DOD nor the Selective Service has a good understanding of the supply and demand of manpower. On the supply side, the Selective Service knows that there are around 16 million men in the pool of 18- to 25-year-olds.²⁵ However, the agency cannot estimate how many could be inducted into the military. There are three reasons why.

First, the United States does not classify men as they register for the Selective Service.²⁶ This means that beyond home of record and birthdays, the Selective Service knows almost nothing about these individuals. Considering the significant increases in obesity, autism, asthma, allergies, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder since the 1970s, the frightening reality is that no one really knows how many Americans meet the medical requirements to serve should the Nation call.²⁷

Second, there are major unknowns about qualifications for deferments. Class 2 draft deferments are reserved for individuals whose civilian occupations are essential to national health or safety or

other national interests such as defense production. Currently, there is just one identified category—for those studying for the ministry.²⁸ During the Vietnam War, Class 2 deferments numbered over 1.7 million and produced some of the most bitter accusations of class bias in the draft.²⁹ If the recent COVID-19 pandemic serves as an example, this debate on who is or is not an essential worker will likely continue to be a significant emotional event under the pressure of an LSCO.

Third, Class 3 draft deferments are reserved for those with family responsibilities that could result in extreme hardships. During the Vietnam War, there were only around 213,000 of these cases, a small number compared to the millions who were drafted, but American society looks a lot different today.³⁰ For example, according to the Pew Research Center and the U.S. Census, the number of single fathers heading households with minor children increased tenfold from fewer than 300,000 in 1960 to over 3 million in 2022.³¹ In another example, the number of families living in poverty increased from 5 million in 1972 to over 7.4 million in 2021.³² It is difficult to predict how many Class 3 deferments would be issued, particularly because local draft boards have historically enjoyed wide latitude in determining what is or is not considered extreme hardship.³³

These are just some of the reasons why it is difficult to get a good assessment of the supply of manpower available to the Nation in a time of crisis, and it would be a mistake to stumble into the draft without gaining a better understanding of what it would entail.

On the demand side, when recently directed by Congress to provide an updated analysis of personnel needs requiring mass mobilization, DOD provided numbers developed in 1994.³⁴ According to a Government Accountability Office report in 2019, "DOD officials stated that they did not conduct additional analysis because the all-volunteer force is of adequate size and composition to meet DOD's personnel needs" and then further stated that "there are no operational plans



Military recruits take oath of enlistment from Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III during enlistment ceremony on Fort George G. Meade, July 5, 2023 (U.S. Army/Jasmyne Ferber)

that envision mobilization at a level that would require a draft.”³⁵ In other words, DOD does not know, and it does not think it needs to know, how many people may be required to fight a major war.

In 2019, U.S. Military Entrance Processing Command (MEPCOM) conducted internal research to update the process for inducting draftees. After extensive research, the command concluded that “there are currently no valid DOD-level documents establishing requirements, responsibilities, and roles to implement the induction of draftees into military service in support of mobilization.”³⁶ Without knowing the supply or demand, it is difficult to know the required throughput. Without knowing the throughput, it is impossible to create the proper structure to process in a timely manner the number of personnel DOD will need to fight the major war that our current National Military Strategy foresees.

Recommendations

There are at least three recommendations that the U.S. military and Selective

Service could implement to mitigate these challenges. These are purposefully broad in scope, as the ongoing discussion about the state of the AVF, recruitment challenges, Selective Service, or decline in a sense of civic duty mostly occurs in silos, even though the issues are inherently linked. More troubling, the current debate is focused on the symptoms rather than addressing the root causes of the problem. To prepare our nation to meet the manpower requirements during a large-scale war, improving and modernizing the AVF and Selective Service is necessary but insufficient. We must also change the culture and narrative surrounding people’s obligation to serve during times of crisis.

First, to gain a better understanding about the demand for manpower, DOD needs to conduct large-scale mobilization exercises supported by Selective Service and other governmental agencies. In 1978, a mobilization exercise called Nifty Nugget identified significant gaps and shortcomings in DOD procedures. Some of the findings were:

- existing mobilization plans were a hodgepodge of old and unconnected Presidential emergency orders, policies, regulations, and procedures³⁷
- lack of trained Reservists forced the Army to reallocate Active-duty personnel for mobilization tasks³⁸
- the pool of Individual Ready Reservists was well below the level needed by the Army to bring Active and Reserve units quickly up to wartime manning levels and to provide replacements for casualties (a finding eerily similar to the IRR’s current state).³⁹

Some of the notable changes that resulted after Nifty Nugget were the creation of U.S. Transportation Command, the reinstatement of draft registration, and the creation of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, in addition to numerous updates to mobilization plans and policies within DOD and other Federal agencies.⁴⁰ A modern-day version of Nifty Nugget would help DOD begin to identify gaps and articulate the demand for manpower



Marine Gunnery Sergeant Meagan Barragan, administrative specialist with Headquarters and Support Battalion, Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, swings kettlebell at Paige Field House on Camp Pendleton, California, February 7, 2022 (U.S. Marine Corps/Shaina Jupiter)

in quality (required knowledge, skills, and abilities) and quantity (rate of induction into service).

In an encouraging sign, the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act directed the Secretary of Defense to establish an executive agent for national mobilization and designate a senior civilian responsible for developing, managing, and coordinating policy and plans for mobilization readiness.⁴¹ It further directed DOD to conduct a major mobilization exercise starting that year and every 5 years afterward.⁴² Although slow to respond, DOD is moving toward compliance; however, it should see this as not only a congressional requirement but also an opportunity to increase readiness. Just as investing billions of dollars in military hardware is a deterrent against potential adversaries, demonstrating that the United States is preparing to commit its most treasured asset, America's sons and daughters, would send an unmistakable signal of U.S. resolve to both our adversaries and our allies.

Second, to gain a better understanding about the supply of manpower, the Selective Service should lead a mock induction exercise supported by DOD and other governmental agencies. This exercise should start from induction notification to classification. By region or by state, random counties should be selected and

induction notifications sent to about 10 percent of the required quota. Selectees would then show up at MEPCOM for screening and classification. In the process, local boards should be included to consider real deferment requests. This exercise accomplishes several objectives:

- It would be an excellent rehearsal for both the Selective Service and DOD at multiple echelons, focusing on the major friction point of “handoff” of individuals between the two agencies.
- The targeting of around 10 percent of the population would allow data scientists to extrapolate valuable information about the supply of manpower. Out of 10,000 notifications, how many qualified for induction? How many requested deferments and for what categories? For those that did not meet the qualification standards, what were the reasons?
- This type of exercise would help to educate the American people about their civic duty and obligation during a national emergency. It would also generate a national dialogue around service.
- Publishing the results of the exercise would allow local leaders to gain additional insights on some of the pressing issues within their

community. Instead of just talking about the problem of obesity, poor academics, and misbehavior of our youth leading to 77 percent being disqualified from military service, people could assess the state of their own community and act.⁴³

Third, rather than narrowly focusing on building military combat capability, the military accession system should be modernized and the concept of service broadened to include public service (working for other parts of the U.S. Government) and national service (nongovernmental or civic groups providing community service) in addition to military service. This is like the recommendation recently proposed by the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service.⁴⁴ This new concept could have the following characteristics:

- First, expand draft registration to all Americans to include women. At the same time, broaden the scope of service to include public and national service so that those who do not want to or are unable to serve in the military are still contributing to the war effort. In future wars, the U.S. military will need more than just traditional combat Servicemembers. It will need civilian personnel with spe-

cialized skill sets to serve in support of the military as well as local communities. With few exceptions, every American should be prepared to serve in some capacity during a national emergency.

- Second, provide volunteer opportunities for all Americans to complete their service obligation during peacetime. If they successfully complete their terms of service in public, national, or military service, exempt them from any future involuntary call-up. Based on personal preferences, this option of removing uncertainty in their future could motivate people to volunteer. More important, this could generate a movement where volunteer service becomes a new societal norm.
- Third, provide additional incentives for people who volunteer for future government services and benefits such as student loans, small business loans, stimulus checks, unemployment benefits, and so on. To broaden the

target audience beyond the lower socioeconomic strata, include tax incentives such as locking individuals who volunteer into the lowest Federal income tax bracket until retirement age. This could help nudge people into volunteer service who would not have considered it in the past.

This is not a mandatory national service program, but a voluntary system that gives the American people more options on when and how they can serve. This is a paradigm shift in how people have traditionally thought about Selective Service, but the new social, political, and strategic realities necessitate a drastic change. At the same time, generating a national discussion about service would help increase the overall pool of people interested in all forms of service, including military service. In addition, priming the public and instilling a greater sense of civic duty through volunteerism will help ease the transition toward mass mobilization, if it occurs.

Today, the U.S. military and the AVF are synonymous, and criticism of one implies criticism of the other. In many of our strategic documents, the continuation of the AVF is not just an assumption; it has become a fact. The AVF is a tool that the Nation should periodically and objectively reevaluate to ensure it is not only suitable for future conflicts, but also feasible and acceptable for the American people. Although the United States has spent the past 50 years with a volunteer force, prior to 1973 every major war that the United States fought and won included a mixed force of volunteers and draftees. The U.S. military needs to celebrate that legacy and educate itself and the American people about the costs of the wars for which it is currently preparing. If it fails to do so, the U.S. military will be in danger of making careless assumptions and once again developing a plan to win the first battle without a coherent strategy to win the larger war. **JFQ**



New York National Guard Specialist Stevenson Philip, assigned to 2nd Squadron 101st Cavalry, performs flex arm hang portion of German Armed Forces proficiency badge trial during Best Warrior Competition at Camp Smith, New York, April 4, 2023 (U.S. Army National Guard/Jean Sanon)

Notes

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