



FROM BLACK BOOTS TO DESERT BOOTS: THE ALL-VOLUNTEER ARMY EXPERIMENT CONTINUES

By Leonard Wong



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In 1970, the President's Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force delivered its report to the President of the United States, Richard Nixon. In the report, better known as the Gates Commission due to the leadership of former Secretary of Defense Thomas Gates, the members of the Commission stated, "We unanimously believe that the nation's interests will be better served by an all-volunteer force, supported by an effective stand-by draft." They added, "We have satisfied ourselves that a volunteer force will not jeopardize national security, and we believe it will have a beneficial effect on the military as well as the rest of our society."¹ In June of 1973, after years of debate, the statutory authority for the draft expired and the all-volunteer force became a reality

An effective way to survey the evolution of the all-volunteer force is to examine the different eras of the all-volunteer Army. General Maxwell R. Thurman, widely viewed as the principal architect of the all-volunteer force, liked to point out that instead of examining the all-volunteer Army as a monolithic, static entity, it was important to analyze the different eras of the all-volunteer force.² The following paragraphs distill the evolution of the U.S. all-volunteer

¹ Gates, Thomas S. Jr., *The Report of the President's Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force*, Washington, D.C., February 1970, p. iii.

² See Maxwell R. Thurman, "Sustaining the All-Volunteer Force: 1983-1992: The Second Decade," in *The All-Volunteer Force After a Decade*, eds. William Bowman, Roger Little, and G. Thomas Sicilia (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1986), p. 266-285 and Maxwell R. Thurman, "On Being All You Can Be: A Recruiting Perspective," in *Professional on the Front Line: Two Decades of the All-Volunteer Force*, eds. J. Eric Fredland, Curtis Gilroy, Roger D. Little, and W. S. Sellman (Washington: Brassey's, 1996) p. 55-65.

Army into five eras. Examining the all-volunteer Army in five distinct phases highlights the many factors that have impacted the force over time, yet is parsimonious enough to allow larger trends to emerge.

1ST ALL-VOLUNTEER ARMY: 1973 - 1980

The first all-volunteer Army began with what, on the surface, appeared to be solid footing. Shortly before the draft ended, Congress gave first term soldiers an unprecedented 61.2 percent pay raise.³ The increase in pay combined with rising unemployment appeared to give the fledgling all-volunteer Army a favorable start. Unfortunately, the pay increase also had unanticipated second and third order effects. The large pay increase achieved pay parity for young soldiers, but subsequent military pay raises were consistently capped below wage increases in the private sector by a Congress and society who believed they had already done enough for the military. The reduced pay comparability, combined with the pay compression caused by newly recruited privates earning almost as much as their sergeants, eventually led to a gradual despondency in the mid-grade non-commissioned officer (NCO) ranks.

Compounding the problems were inadequate funding to ensure the ability to recruit quality soldiers and the loss of the Vietnam era GI Bill that attracted high quality recruits in search of federal aid for higher education. With morale still low because of the lingering effects of the Vietnam War, disillusionment gradually overcame the force and drove many NCOs and officers out of the Army as they encountered low quality soldiers and deteriorating conditions. In 1973, the Army Chief of Staff Creighton W. Abrams turned to the faculty and staff at the Army War College and asked them to answer the simple question, “Why an Army?” In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the profession was struggling to define its *raison d'être*.

Declining enlistment rates, low quality recruits, high attrition, and plummeting morale were indicators that the fledgling force manned with volunteers was becoming dangerously fragile. Despite the mounting problems, a 1978 Department of Defense report on the status of the all-volunteer force reported that:

The quality of those serving on active duty, as measured by the education levels of active duty personnel and the average test scores of new recruits, has not declined as popularly believed but has markedly and steadily improved since the end of the draft.⁴

Unfortunately, the new recruit test scores mentioned in the report were derived from the new Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) and subsequently the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT). Unbeknownst to the Department of Defense and unconfirmed for several years was the fact that the tests were misnormed. Although Army recruiters were told that their total recruiting target could only be five to six percent of mental aptitude Category IV—the lowest mental category acceptable for military service—per the AFQT, the misnorming of the test allowed many more into the force. In 1979, the Army reported that 9 percent of the new recruits were Category IV. In reality, 42 percent of all new soldiers were Category IV due to the misnorming.⁵ Although Army readiness levels were acceptable on paper, it was during this era of the all-volunteer force that the Army's Chief of Staff, General Edward C. Meyer, informed Congress that the Army was actually “a hollow Army.”⁶

In the spring of 1976, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point was rocked by scandal as over 150 cadets were expelled for cheating on an out-of-class electrical engineering exam. With West Point graduates supposedly providing the professional foundation for the officer corps, the profession was shaken. Adding to the introspection caused by the scandal, 119 women arrived in July as part of the first West Point class with women (62 graduated four years later). The debate and controversy that initially resulted with the introduction of women into West Point has largely subsided, but the overall issues involving the role of women in an all-volunteer Army remain.

The first era of the all-volunteer Army began with a time of high expectations and ended with the nadir of the

³ Thurman (1986, p. 268).

⁴ Department of Defense, *America's Volunteers: A Report on the All-Volunteer Armed Forces*, December 31, 1978, Washington, DC, p. 3.

⁵ Janice H. Laurence, and Peter F. Ramsberger, *Low-aptitude Men in the Military: Who Profits, Who Pays?* (New York: Praeger, 1991), p. 68.

⁶ See Chapter 5 “Era of the Hollow Army” in *Who Will Lead? Senior Leadership in the United States Army*, Edward C. Meyer, R. Manning Ancell, and Jane Mahaffey, (Westport Connecticut: Praeger 1995) p. 145-187.

professional Army. It was a time of low quality soldiers, disillusioned officers, and a tarnished societal perception of the Army. The taking of sixty-six hostages after the storming of the U.S. embassy in Tehran, Iran compounded the malaise creeping into the Army. The failure of Operation Eagle Claw to rescue the hostages concluded a very disheartening phase for the all-volunteer force. Because of the state of the all-volunteer force during this time period, President Richard Nixon—who introduced the all-volunteer Army during his campaign for the presidency—suggested that it might be prudent to turn back to the draft because “the volunteer army has failed to provide enough personnel of the caliber we need for our highly sophisticated armaments.”⁷

2ND ALL-VOLUNTEER ARMY: 1980 – 1991

In contrast to the first era, the second era of the all-volunteer Army was characterized by progress and success. One of the early signs of life being breathed back into the demoralized force was an 11.1 percent pay raise for all ranks in 1981 and a 14.3 percent raise in 1982. The pay increases were invaluable in lifting the morale of enlisted soldiers and officers who had endured the hardships of the 1970s.

The rebound of the all-volunteer Army after the near failure in the 1970s was exemplified by the extraordinary success of the advertising campaign slogan of “Be All You Can Be.” The slogan eventually pushed the Army into one of the most recognizable brands in America, but more importantly, the slogan was attractive to both potential recruits and serving soldiers. “Be All You Can Be” represented the nascent professional Army of the 1980s—a far cry from the “Today’s Army Wants to Join You” slogan of the early 1970s.

The quality of incoming soldiers increased as the Army focused on a “dual market” approach. Studies showed that young people potentially interested in joining the Army were generally work-oriented or college-oriented. Higher pay and training appealed to those in the former group who viewed the Army as a means to learn a skill. The latter group, however, was attracted to deferred incentives, especially money to attend college. The college-oriented group was critical in that soldiers in this group generally were easier to train, had less discipline problems, and retained better. The image of the Army in the eyes of society rose and soon the Army was recruiting levels of quality as indicated by nearly all recruits being high school diploma graduates (compared with 58 percent in 1973) and only 4 percent in the lowest acceptable mental category.

Pay raises, renewed attention on the families, and the emphasis on raising the overall quality of life for soldiers were part of a gradual departure from a conscription based belief that soldiers were a “free good.” The draft had created an organizational culture that valued the service of soldiers, yet acted as if soldiers were replaceable at zero cost. From senior leaders to drill sergeants, a gradual realization was emerging that if soldiers did not feel valued or respected—especially the high quality troops—they would leave.

It was during this era that the Army began its “training revolution” with a focus on more deliberate planning, measurable outcomes, and continual evaluation. The renewed emphasis on training culminated in the establishment of the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California. In addition to the transformed emphasis on training, the Army introduced much needed improvements to key acquisition programs. The “Big Five” weapons system programs were initiated in the 1970s, but arrived in the 1980s to a force desperate for modernization. The Abrams main battle tank, Bradley infantry fighting vehicle, Patriot missile system, Blackhawk helicopter, and Apache attack helicopter gave the Army a much improved combat capability that helped fuel the increasing professionalism of the force

One of the key concerns of the Gates Commission report was the issue of civilian control of the military. Critics of the all-volunteer force claimed that the uniformed military would be tempted to intervene in political matters. Despite the confidence reflected in the Gates Commission report that the senior military leadership would not have undue influence on policy making, the second era of the all-volunteer force was marked by a growing concern about senior military leaders circumventing civilian authorities. The Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, commonly referred to as Goldwater-Nichols because of its sponsors Senator Barry Goldwater and Representative William Nichols, was passed partly to reestablish a clear chain of command between the civilian overseers and uniformed military.

⁷ Richard M. Nixon, *The Real War* (New York: Warner Books, 1980), p. 201.

The second era of the all-volunteer Army was marked by a renaissance across the ranks. The successes of this era culminated in two key events. First, the fall of the Berlin Wall showed that the all-volunteer force had succeeded in deterring Warsaw Pact aggression. Second, the Persian Gulf War displayed in one hundred hours the amazing effectiveness of highly trained, high quality soldiers operating with high tech equipment under highly competent leadership.

3RD ALL-VOLUNTEER ARMY: 1991 – 2001

The direction of the third era of the all-volunteer Army in the late 1990s was largely set into motion by budgetary restrictions planned in the mid-1980s as well as the end of the Cold War. With the United States emerging as the world's only superpower, American society was eager to shrink the Army and reap the economic "peace dividend" from the defense budget. Between 1990 and 1997, the active duty Army was downsized from eighteen divisions and 781,000 soldiers to ten divisions and 480,000 soldiers. With many Army senior leaders having experienced the impersonal and painful downsizing after the end of the Vietnam War, deliberate policies were put in place to minimize the detrimental effects of downsizing.

With the Soviet Union gone as the prime antagonist for national security, the Army shifted to the more fundamental role of "serving the American people"⁸ by providing disciplined, trained, manpower capable of deploying to a possibly dangerous environment. Soldiers found themselves once again patrolling the borders—this time in counterdrug operations. The Army once again deployed to the American west—this time to fight forest fires. Soldiers once again took postings to faraway lands – this time under the mil-to-mil engagement policy.⁹ The Army was deployed to Haiti, Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo. Constabulary forces were left behind in Bosnia and Kosovo with no end date in sight.

In October of 2000, General Eric Shinseki, the Army's Chief of Staff, delivered a speech announcing some very significant changes for the Army—a new readiness reporting system, improvements to the beleaguered military medical system, and a proposed increase in the size of the Army to alleviate the peacekeeping deployment strain on soldiers. Somehow, however, these initiatives were overshadowed by a seemingly innocent policy change announced almost as an afterthought—issuing every soldier a black beret.

Howls of protest followed the announcement almost immediately. Members of elite units—the Rangers, Special Forces, and paratroopers—were the first to decry their loss of distinctiveness through the egalitarian issue of the beret. Former Rangers marched from Fort Benning to the White House to deliver a beret in protest. Because some of the berets would be purchased from, of all countries, China, Congress became involved. Finally, after congressional pressure and a nudge from the White House, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld put the plan on hold until further review. Meanwhile the media and public watched in puzzlement over what seemed to be an inordinate amount of discussion and dissent over a hat.

But the hullabaloo over the beret was not about fashion. It was about the arduous process of changing an Army that had for half a century equipped, trained, and prepared itself to fight World War III—and did it very well. And yet that very success posed an obstacle for change in the future. The need for change became obvious in 1990 when the only forces that could be deployed quickly against the armored columns of Saddam Hussein were the outgunned paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division. A decade later, the difficulties in deploying Task Force Hawk to Kosovo reinforced the growing concern that the Army was still working with a Cold War mindset in a post-Cold War world.

The black beret was intended to be a symbol of unity to pull the Army together as it confronted the challenges in the process of change. Instead, an Army survey during that period showed that despite the Chief of Staff's efforts to change the thinking of the leadership of the Army, 50 percent of battalion and brigade commanders reported that they were uncomfortable with the pending changes of transforming the Army. In hindsight, it is almost incredulous that— a year before the terrorist attacks of September of 2001—half of the soon-to-be strategic leaders of the Army were skeptical of shifting from a Cold War force to a more agile Army.

⁸ Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual 1, *The Army*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001, p. 1.

⁹ See for example the series by Dana Priest, "The Proconsuls: America's Soldier-Diplomats," *The Washington Post*, September 28 – 30, 2000 that discusses the role of the military in diplomacy.

Thus, the third era of the all-volunteer Army was marked by uncertainty—uncertainty about the magnitude and duration of the downsizing as well as uncertainty about the role of the Army in the world. The uncertainty of the third era of the all-volunteer Army, however, came to an abrupt halt on the morning of September 11, 2001.

4TH ALL-VOLUNTEER ARMY: 2001 – 2014

With the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, a focused sense of purpose and urgency descended upon the Army. Less than a month after the attacks, combat operations were initiated against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The swift successes of special operations forces working with indigenous allies combined with the employment of precision weapons garnered the attention of policy makers. It seemed to many policy makers that the requirement for a large, and often cumbersome, Army had dissipated with this new way of war.

In the weeks that followed the invasion of Iraq in early March of 2003, it appeared that the Army was performing magnificently. By May 1, 2003, the president declared that major combat operations had concluded. Once again, the quality of the American soldier had been a major factor in the battlefield success. The all-volunteer Army concept was once again validated. As the jubilation over the liberation of Iraq began to wane, however, the Army began to confront the reality of simultaneously rebuilding post-war Iraq and fighting a counterinsurgency.

In the chaotic years after the invasion, junior leaders were tasked to conduct missions for which they never trained, executed operations that had outpaced Army doctrine, shifted constantly from adrenaline-pumping counterinsurgency operations to patience-demanding nation building, and received very little detailed guidance or supervision in the process. While this development alarmed some, it also had the unanticipated effect that a large cohort of the Army began developing *adaptability*—a competency that the Army had long recognized as vital to future warfare, yet had also discovered was very difficult to develop in a non-deployed Army. By being confronted with complexity, unpredictability, and ambiguity, junior leaders were learning to adapt, to innovate, and to operate with minimal guidance.¹⁰

Despite the initial surge of enthusiasm in society for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, opposition to the wars steadily increased. According to a Gallup Poll, 23 percent of Americans in March of 2003 believed the U.S. made a mistake in sending troops to Iraq. By 2008, that number had increased to 63 percent.¹¹ In 2001, less than 10 percent of Americans thought that military action in Afghanistan was a mistake. By 2014, 49 percent believed it was a mistake and 48 percent did not.¹²

The most significant impact of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, was the strain on its personnel. A single twelve or fifteen month deployment could be taxing yet feasible for a young soldier with a growing family. Multiple deployments with only a year respite before deploying again, on the other hand, took their toll on the quality of life. Years of the unpopular wars also turned recruiting for the Army into a continuous struggle. Lowered enlistment standards, raised age limitations, and seemingly endless cash enlistment bonuses barely kept the Army's head above water. When the Gates Commission delivered its report forty years ago, it assumed that the all-volunteer force would be supported by an effective standby draft and it did not anticipate that long wars would be measured in decades, not years. The end of the fourth era of the all-volunteer Army resulted in the world's most competent Army, but also an Army stretched beyond its limits.

5TH ALL-VOLUNTEER ARMY: 2014 –

The Army is once again facing an uncertain future environment. The national military strategy emphasizing a pivot towards Asia is a not-so-subtle signal that the nation has no appetite for land wars or troops occupying foreign countries. Congress's inaction in stopping sequestration revealed that the days of the military receiving a blank

¹⁰ See Leonard Wong, *Developing Adaptive Leaders: The Crucible Experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College) 2004.

¹¹ Andrew Dugan, *On 10th Anniversary, 53% in U.S. See Iraq War as Mistake*, Gallup Poll, March 18, 2013. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/161399/10th-anniversary-iraq-war-mistake.aspx>

¹² Frank Newport, *More Americans Now View Afghanistan War as a Mistake*, Gallup Poll, February 19, 2014. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/167471/americans-view-afghanistan-war-mistake.aspx>

check are over. The downsizing is in progress while tensions in Ukraine, Syria, Africa, and South Korea simmer. Cyberwarfare, the treatment of veterans, PTSD and TBI, and the growing gap between the military and the society it serves will be some of the many issues facing the all-volunteer force in this new era marked by uncertainty and ambiguity.

The all-volunteer military continues to be the institution that holds the most societal confidence. American society is appreciative of an institution that does its job well and subordinates its own interests to those of society. Yet vulnerabilities in that confidence can emerge from the military fighting for its piece of the shrinking fiscal pie, the perceived neglect of veterans, or the growing political activity of retired general officers.

In 1983, the remarkable success of the all-volunteer force led Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger to exclaim, "To all the American people, I would say that the experiment is over. We know that an all-volunteer force can succeed, and we know what it takes to make it succeed." And yet, perhaps we really cannot know all it takes to make the all-volunteer Army succeed. Considering the circumstances, it appears that this experiment called the all-volunteer Army is not over.

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