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**THE ALL-VOLUNTEER FORCE:
IS THE EXPERIMENT OVER?**

CORE COURSE 5605 ESSAY

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Introduction

One oft-repeated claim which has reached the status of conventional wisdom is that the stunning performance of U S. military forces in the Gulf War vindicated the concept of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF). Pundits in Washington along with many military observers saw the victory as much the result of talented and professional military personnel as it was of the high-tech equipment they operated. The results seemed to speak for themselves--years of investment in training, recruiting, compensation packages, and quality of life initiatives had produced what President Clinton later described as “the best-trained, best equipped, best prepared military force in the world” (7:23). The “hollow force” of the 1970s was a distant memory, one that policymakers and commanders vowed never to repeat. Even before the Gulf War, some had already claimed victory for the AVF. In 1983, Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger declared the AVF a success and assured that America never need return to a draft, announcing “the experiment is over” and the term “All-Volunteer Force” could now “go without saying” (15:48). But is the experiment truly over, or is the jury still out? Will tomorrow’s force require an even higher quality recruit than the AVF can provide? Will increased OPTEMPO and PERSTEMPO coupled with growing perceptions of eroded benefits drive out experienced NCOs and officers? What demographic and social factors may hinder the military’s ability to recruit high quality personnel? Are we beginning to see warning signs in slipping retention and recruiting indicators? This paper will attempt to address these issues and assess the continued viability of what some have described as the “greatest social experiment ever conducted in America.” The essay will conclude with the author’s policy recommendations for ensuring a future quality force.

Quality Personnel Required in the Future

Military readiness depends in large part on our continuing ability to attract top-quality men and women to our armed forces--and retain them after they have gained superior technical and leadership skills.

--President Bill Clinton, 1996

President Clinton's statement reflects a realization that the foundation of our military rests on the continued quality of new recruits as well as the growth and development of those personnel who elect to stay beyond one term. Why are the Armed Forces so insistent on recruiting high school graduates and those from the highest mental categories? The answer is simple. Empirical evidence shows that these recruiting indicators correlate very highly with later performance and retention. For example, one study found that Patriot missile fire control operators who were top scorers on recruiting entrance exams performed at twice the skill level of counterparts who scored at the bottom (11.1). Furthermore, high school graduates generally have greater retention and experience only a fraction of the disciplinary problems as peers who dropped out of high school (5). Numerous studies have confirmed that the U.S. military cannot afford to lower its entrance standards without paying a significant price in lowered performance and retention

Notwithstanding today's strict requirements for a quality force, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has raised the bar in setting the standard for *tomorrow's force* in *Joint Vision 2010*. This document envisions a military force capable of achieving "full spectrum dominance" on tomorrow's battlefield through "precision engagement, dominant maneuver, full dimension protection, and focused logistics." JV 2010 recognizes that people have always been "the essence of the armed forces" and that "to sustain the armed forces and instill these new operational concepts will require high quality people--the key ingredient for success" (10.6,27). Although

much of the vision statement highlights technological opportunities and innovative operational concepts, it warns that future doctrine will only be as good as the people who implement it. The complexity of the battlefield and accelerated “OODA loops” will require an extremely sophisticated operating force. Thus, JV 2010 concludes that “recruiting and retaining dedicated high quality people will remain our first priority” (10:28).

Other trends also suggest a growing dependence upon top-notch personnel in the future. First, U.S. military forces seem to be increasingly involved in Operations Other than War (OOTW), often involving a relatively small force presence in a politically sensitive environment. Under such conditions, the tactical actions of an individual soldier, sailor, or airmen may have enormous strategic implications, making the case for quality operators all the more compelling. In the words of a recent House National Security Committee report, “the successful conduct of these operations places a far higher premium on well-trained and motivated personnel than it does on advanced technology” (21.27). This reality is further reinforced by a continually shrinking force structure that will by definition require the ability of personnel to operate in multiple roles with greater versatility. To help define the specific characteristics of the 21st century force, the Joint Staff recently commissioned a RAND study. RAND’s initial response suggests that the future force may have more emphasis on mental versus physical capabilities and will probably require “skills and knowledge that are not tied to public educational curriculum” (18:4). Clearly, the success of tomorrow’s military will hinge on the ability to retain and recruit quality personnel. Unfortunately, a number of factors seem to threaten the health of this future AVF

Threats to the All-Volunteer Force

One ingredient that has the potential to jeopardize the continued viability of the AVF is the growing peace time operational tempo (OPTEMPO) and personnel tempo (PERSTEMPO) that has stretched the force thin over the past five years. OPTEMPO refers to the frequency of unit deployments while PERSTEMPO measures the time away from home of the individual servicemember. Each may have an enormous impact on readiness and morale, and ultimately recruiting and retention. More and more observers fear that continued high OP-PERSTEMPO of our force is all but inevitable, especially given our National Military Strategy of engagement around the globe. The Atlantic Fleet commander, Admiral Reason, candidly explained in testimony before the House National Security Committee that “for a CINC, more is always better” and that we will continue to overtask our forces until there is “a medium [for the CINCs] to exercise fiscal responsibility.” He frustratingly and rhetorically asked the committee “if we are now at peace, why are we using these assets at such a high rate?” (24 6) One recent GAO study even speculated that commanders may be “competing for deployments” to bolster the value of their units during the force drawdown and Quadrennial Defense Review (23:11).

Whatever the reason, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that increased OPTEMPO is taking its toll on the force. A House National Security Report released in April 1997 concluded that “soldiers, sailors, airmen, & Marines are working harder and longer to execute their peacetime missions due to an inherent tension between personnel and resource shortages and an increased pace of operations” (21.2). The report cited numerous morale and readiness impacts of the high tempo including Air Force members losing leave and Army soldiers picking up additional

duties to cover for deployed or discharged peers (21:7). Although alarming, the report contains little macro-level evidence to support its assertions.

Fortunately, the services have developed some indicators to specifically track the tempo of their forces; however, each is based on differing PERSTEMPO definitions and accounting mechanisms. As a result, the Joint Staff has developed an integrated scheme for highlighting deployment trends within each service. J-1's analysis found that the Navy and Marine Corps deployment patterns remained fairly stable over the last five years, with approximately 11-14% of each service's personnel supporting deployments greater than 30 days. This stability is no surprise given the operations cycles of naval forces which require sea duty away from home for six months out of each year. And Naval commanders generally argue that their system has little margin to support additional commitments. The Air Force and the Army, however, have seen dramatic increases in PERSTEMPO over the past five years. Within the Army, individuals supporting long term deployments (> 30 days) grew from 6% of the force in 1990, to 10% in 1996. Air Force deployment rates tripled over the same period, increasing from 2.5% to 7% (1).

These figures suggest that while OPTEMPO and PERSTEMPO may be on the rise, the pain is felt by a relatively small percentage of the force. In fact, the brunt of the deployments have been disproportionately carried by low-density/high-demand (LD/HD) skill groups which are continually required to support various OOTW around the globe. A GAO study found that special forces units, Patriot battalions, military police, and electronic warfare squadrons were the most heavily tasked with most having "at least one element, such as a company or detachment, deployed for over one-half of each year" from 1992-1996, in addition to supporting normal training TDYs (23:6-7).

While recognizing the reality of upward trends in PERSTEMPO, service and Joint Staff officials generally claim that this has not translated into decreased readiness or retention for the force. In testimony before the Military Readiness Subcommittee in April 1996, service representatives avoided “crying wolf” over the tempo issue, despite the invitation to do so by the subcommittee chairman, Mr Harold Bateman (22). Likewise, in a memo to Secretary of Defense Perry on the issue, Gen Shalikashvili noted that no services had experienced a drop in retention as a result of high OPTEMPO and that “training has not been adversely affected” (19.12)

Despite these assertions, there is increasing evidence that high OPTEMPO *is* impacting morale, that could translate into retention difficulties in the very near future. A 1995 Army survey found that 61% of enlisted and 47% of officers were unhappy about excessive deployments, with one-third of the respondents complaining they were away from home over 3 months out of the year. Other Army surveys noted a 10-19% drop in morale indicators since 1991 (21:17,19). A GAO report found that numerous high-deploying units in the Army and the Air Force were approaching a “saturation point” with definite increases in disciplinary and family problems and a decrease in retention. One-third of Air Force survey respondents said excessive deployments were causing financial and marital stress. The GAO study also chronicled the intense deployment history of an Air Force AWACS unit that experienced back-to-back deployments to Haiti, Saudi Arabia, and Bosnia, followed by a unit move (23 13). Despite these pockets of PERSTEMPO “overload,” the services have not chosen to highlight these as readiness deficiencies in the Joint Monthly Readiness Report (JMMR) provided to the CJCS, even though the JMRR allows the services to use this as a vehicle to “report on the readiness impact of operations tempo” and highlight PERSTEMPO issues (4,9:D-2). Alternatively, the new Global Military Force Policy

(GMFP) system has been used since July 1996 to track 22 LD/HD assets and establish steady state and surge deployment limits for each unit or specialty type. This report, provided monthly to the CJCS, has been somewhat successful in limiting the OPTEMPO of personnel associated with the U-2, RC-135, Rivet Joint, AWACS and other units (2). In summary, although increasing OP-PERSTEMPO is a reality, especially for the Air Force and Army, it's not clear yet what long-term impact this will have on the All-Volunteer Force.

This threat is not limited to the active duty force. The All-Volunteer Force is a *Total Force*, composed of both active duty and reserve personnel. Since 1994, reservists and guardsmen have also been called up at an increasing rate to support various peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. Over 4,000 reservists were involuntarily activated for the Bosnia effort (13:215). Significant increases in OPTEMPO may strain the supportive attitudes of the families and employers of reservists, hurting retention. One study found that reservists with unfavorable employer attitudes had significantly lower retention rates than those with supportive employers. The link was even greater for spousal attitudes, with an 85% average retention rate for reservists with supportive spouses versus a 42% rate for those with spouses who were frustrated by frequent absences from home (14:x). A former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, Stephen Duncan, is troubled by the increased use of reservists to support operations not necessarily of vital interest to the U.S.:

The involuntary activation of citizen warriors for activities that do not involve important security interests, that have no urgency, . . . is an ironic perversion of an important premise upon which the Total Force concept was originally based (13:219).

Duncan fears that overuse of these reservists "in peacetime" may ultimately hurt retention and our ability to attract quality recruits in the future.

High OPTEMPO is not the only factor that threatens to reduce retention and recruiting rates. Quality of life issues, particularly concerns over compensation, housing, retirement benefits, health care, and promotion opportunities, could also erode the commitment of the enlisted force. Current figures show that military pay lags inflation by 4.6% with the gap projected to increase to 18% by 2001 (6:42). A strong economy, with good employment opportunities in the private sector, may make a military career appear less lucrative to those in and out of the service. More of the force is married (over 60%) than ever before, magnifying family issues like commissary and exchange programs which are coming under increasing scrutiny (12:19). And rarely does a budget season go by without some talk of further eroding the military retirement system which has already undergone significant cuts, especially for post-1986 year groups. The military health care system, with its uncertain transition to the TRICARE program, has also produced much anxiety for service members. While it's hard to gauge the precise effect of these quality of life concerns, one can't help but fear that they may be yet another threat to the security of the AVF.

In addition to these factors that may be challenging our ability to retain a high quality force, other trends make recruiting new personnel even harder than ever. For one, the demographic pool is shrinking. The decline of the birth rate in the post-baby boom generations has reduced the raw number of eligible young people for recruiters to target. Not only is the target population smaller, but social trends have made the eligible pool less attractive. SAT scores have dropped over 60 points in the last 35 years. Only 75% of 19 year olds have graduated from high school, and of those, an estimated 20% are functionally illiterate. One-third of today's teenagers are judged overweight and out-of-shape, and 76% admit to cheating during

high school. Some link these trends to the overall decline in the two-parent family--on average, only 56% of children reach the age of 18 in a 2-biological parent household, compared to 78% in 1960. Studies have shown that children from broken homes are 2-3 times more likely to drop out of high school, abuse drugs, and be arrested (17:36). Whatever the cause, there is clearly less ripe pickings for recruiters to draw on.

This quality decline combines with the diminished prestige of a military career to make the recruiter's job even more difficult. The 25-year run of the AVF, albeit very successful, has produced "a subculture with which few Americans are familiar" (17:35). Many children now reach adulthood with no contact or association with a service member, making a military career all but out of the question. Recruiters have found access to campuses more and more difficult, reporting that 40% of high schools refuse to provide names or addresses of seniors. Parents of potential recruits are often prejudiced by negative memories of the Vietnam-era force. "the stereotype NCO, the hard-drinking, cigar chomping, beer-gutted NCO is what a lot of us remember" (17.36). These negative perceptions work to make recruiting potentially the weakest link in the future of the AVF.

Current Recruiting and Retention Indicators

So far, this essay has identified numerous potential threats to recruitment and retention of a quality All-Volunteer Force. But arguably, they remain just "threats," unless accompanied by actual declines in recruiting and retention indicators. What do today's indicators show? Are we beginning to see declines in these critical macro indicators? Let's take a close look at the numbers.

In recruiting, the services have continued to meet their goals, although warning signs abound, particularly for the Army. Since 1992 the percentage of Army recruits with high school diplomas has dropped 5%, to 90%, with FY97 figures further declining to 88%. Also, the number of recruits testing in the highest mental categories has dropped 5%, to 70%, matching the results of the late 1980s (3:4). Even the Air Force has had close calls in meeting its recruiting goals, resorting to television advertising for the first time in years. Furthermore, many basic training instructors report declining performance of new recruits. For example, 1996 saw a 30% failure rate in physical fitness testing at Fort Bragg, NC. All of the services are concerned with a perceived decline in values of their new recruits, with the Marine Corps initiating its “crucible” program to instill absent values, (21:8) and the Air Force devising a program to encourage its members to “return to the core values” of integrity, service, and excellence. For the time being, the services may be getting the minimum quality they need, but we may be seeing a gradual slide towards accepting less in the future, especially considering that surveys measuring the “propensity to enlist” of American teenagers has dropped from 34% in 1989 to 26% today (3:8).

Unlike the recruiting figures, there is less hard evidence of retention problems in today’s force, at least at the macro level. All services are holding steady, although the Air Force and the Navy each reported a 3% drop in first-term reenlistment rates from FY95-FY96 (20). Interestingly, the Air Force and Army have not found any significant retention problems within high-deploying units. In some cases, individuals from deploying units have even reenlisted at higher rates than their non-deploying counterparts (8:4). But this macro-level data doesn’t coincide with the instincts of senior leadership and numerous anecdotal accounts. In the words of the Army’s personnel chief, “My gut tells me at some point in time we will see a dip in retention.

Why it hasn't happened yet mystifies me" (16:6). Confirming these fears, a recent Army study concluded that "25% of senior NCOs and officers indicated that they are leaving the service earlier than planned or are undecided due to downsizing, increased PERSTEMPO, increased stress, concerns about job security, and declining satisfaction with quality of life" (21:19).

Additionally, critical specialties like pilots are beginning another cyclic round of competition with the airline industry, leading service officials to develop new incentives to halt an impending exodus. For this and other reasons many observers fear that our historically high retention rates may be approaching the edge of the cliff.

Conclusions and Recommendations

What conclusions can be drawn from this analysis of the future of the All-Volunteer Force? **First, it's clear that a high quality force will be required in the future, perhaps even a higher quality than we enjoy today.** A smaller force will demand more from its members in a future where technological advances will increase the potency of the individual soldier, sailor, and airmen. **Second, although many factors threaten the viability of the AVF, the force is not yet broke.** OP-PERSTEMPO is taking its toll on the force, but the impact has not clearly manifested itself in retention figures. Erosion of quality-of-life programs and recruiting challenges, particularly the shrinking pool of quality candidates, is also threatening the AVF. Taken individually, none of these factors seem to be having a significant impact, but collectively they could combine to break the force. **Third, we are beginning to see the initial warning signs of subtle declines in recruiting and retention figures.** Mountains of anecdotal evidence suggest that the force is tired, and that recruiters are finding it harder to attract high-quality

replacements. The damn isn't broken, but there are cracks around the edges--the experiment of the All-Volunteer Force is approaching a crisis point.

But fortunately, the experiment's outcome is not a *fait accompli*. DOD leadership, working in concert with the Congressional oversight committees, can take proactive steps to turn around the declining trend lines. **First, each service must work to more equitably distribute PERSTEMPO** LD/HD unit workload should be capped, and additional assets must be developed to better spread the pain. And the services must stop adding to the pain--training and exercise deployments should be kept at a minimum for high-time deployers, even at the risk of reduced readiness. This risk is preferable to the greater risk of burning out a force that will be extremely difficult to replace. Additionally, some mechanism must be developed to fiscally constrain peacetime CINC requirements. Collectively, the services, as well as the JCS, must develop a scheme for "saying no" to marginally important short-term CINC needs that significantly impair the long-term readiness of the force. **Second, the DoD must work to shore up pay and benefits for service members.** Research has show that pay levels are the most important determinant of recruiting and retention success. Skimping on compensation packages may save dollars in the near-term, but could very well cost more in the long-term in trying to replace a deteriorated force. **Finally, we must beef up recruiting programs to increase the services ability to attract prospects in this demanding market.** Legislation should be implemented giving recruiters full-access to high schools and junior colleges. Senior officials from the President on down should use their offices as a bully pulpit to trumpet the advantages of a military career. The concept of service to country needs to be repeatedly espoused by our national leadership.

These initiatives won't be easy or inexpensive. They'll require resources that are becoming harder and harder to come by given the mounting pressures to balance the budget. But the alternative is even more costly. If we allow the All-Volunteer Force experiment to fail, it will take countless years and much national treasure to reconstitute the force--not an acceptable prospect in an uncertain future international security environment.

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