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The Failure of the American Volunteer Military

by Sage Cicero

(English 2820)

The All-Volunteer Force (AVF) of the United States of America started as a measure to both appease the public and conserve the structure and integrity of the military. As stated in “Reassessing the All-Volunteer Force” by Karl Eikenberry, President Nixon was in part elected because he promised an angry youth that he would end the draft that had dragged so many of them to the rice paddies of Vietnam and led thousands of these unwilling participants to their deaths. The country was scrambling to hold itself together after Vietnam created or inflamed tensions at every level of society. Therefore in the early 1970s, the AVF was suggested by the president and unanimously supported by its Advisory Commission, and was hailed as a step towards a better future (Eikenberry 9). The public, the government, and the military were equally pleased with their deal. They could not foresee how the AVF would erode the foundations of everything they held dear.

As a result of the AVF, apathy would spread over the country like a fog and politicians would run loose, pulling the military into conflict after conflict while the public shrugged its shoulders and looked away. The military would lose the very integrity it was fighting for in 1973 when the AVF was implemented because they would no longer answer to the public. The circle of military insiders would shrink and shrink until they policed themselves and turned against anyone from the outside trying to look in. The volunteer military of the United States has been proven to be disastrous for the country, its values, and its people because of civilian disinterest in modern wars, the lack of public pressure on the government, and the lack of accountability within the military.

The United States was founded on the principle of a citizen-soldier. There would be no standing army of a ruling king because the military would assemble from the very citizens themselves when called upon to defend their land. This would insure that the ruling power could not send his mercenaries to fight any battle he desired, but would have to appeal to the public to put down their shovels and pick up arms. In a 2009 speech to West Point students, William Deresiewicz quoted Colonel Scott Krawczyk speaking on this subject and saying “From the very earliest days of this country, the model for our officers, which was built on the model of the citizenry and reflective of democratic ideals, was to be different. They were to be possessed of a democratic spirit marked by independent judgment, the freedom to measure action and to express disagreement, and the crucial responsibility never to tolerate tyranny” (Krawczyk qtd. in Deresiewicz 5).

This is but one of the many enlightened ideals that flourished in the new country of revolutionaries and it was soundly dismantled by the introduction of the AVF in 1973. Due to anger, distrust, and sometimes outright hatred of the military, the public disengaged as soon as they knew they would not be drafted. Today, the vast majority of people never even consider military service for their country. According to the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, which published “Conscription Threatens Hard-Won Achievements and Military Readiness,” this is actually a positive aspect of the AVF. They assert that “During the most recent draft, 90 percent of conscripts quit after their initial two-year hitch, whereas retention of volunteers is five-times better—about half remain after their initial (normally four-year) military service obligation” (1). While the government may view this positively, it means that the military and the “people” of the United States are by and large no longer the same group. The high retention rate of the AVF is beneficial from a financial point of view but the result is that foundational values of America have been lost. There is now a standing army and it does not rely on the average citizen to take up arms in times of war. The citizen-soldier
no longer exists and the model for US military officers, as explained by Colonel Krawczyk, has been lost to the apathy and anger of the American people.

Andrew J. Bacevich harshly criticizes the American public for allowing this divide to take place in *Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country*, stating that “Except as spectators, Americans abrogated any further responsibility for war in all of its aspects. With the people opting out, war became the exclusive province of that state. Washington could do what it wanted—and it did (Bacevich 13). However, the blame cannot be placed solely at the public’s feet. Most people will not willingly sign their autonomy over to the whims of a vast institution like the government unless they believe they will be treated fairly and in the sincerity of that institution. The last conscripted American war, Vietnam—coupled with the perfect storm of racial tension, fear of nuclear war, unemployment, and general political clumsiness—led to widespread disdain and distrust for the government.

What many saw as a flagrant misuse of America’s citizens and military might created a toxic relationship between the public and the politicians. As noted by Bacevich, “Senior military and civilian officials who managed World War II had viewed public support for the war effort as both critical and finite, an essential asset to be carefully nurtured and no less carefully expended. Throughout the war years, concern that citizens might balk at marching orders not to their liking remained omnipresent” (Bacevich 31). A democracy at war is at the mercy of its people’s will and willingness and Vietnam did not respect this delicate balance like World War II did. Therefore, it cannot be surprising nor indefensible of the public to turn away from signing their lives away to a system in which they did not believe. The necessary trust of the public had been stressed and strained so far that some argued it was broken completely.

If not broken, the trust between the American people and the American government was at least deeply flawed. It would have taken years and years to return to the golden age of the 40s and 50s when the government enjoyed widespread support from the people in the wake of World War II. After the disastrous Vietnam War, walking the line to regain public support was deemed too high a price to pay and too difficult to achieve consistently. Instead, the United States government neatly sidestepped the issue altogether by simply removing the issue from everyone’s minds. Conscription was gone and in return, the public would generally support the government’s military actions. The lukewarm but consistent public support would allow the government to make all the decisions it wished without consequence. Former Army general and ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry, laments this lack of accountability in “Reassessing the All-Volunteer Force,” published in the *Washington Quarterly*, worrying that:

Under the AVF model, Congress has even fewer incentives to assert its constitutional responsibilities over the executive branch. Without sizeable numbers of organized constituents fretting about the personal and family costs of a conflict, a legislator has incentive to discount the future and avoid casting a vote against waging war during the flag-waving stage of a crisis. Most members of Congress, always with an eye on reelection, will hesitate before contesting strong executive appeals to commit forces abroad in the stated defense of the national interest. By such abdication of responsibility, Congress is failing to serve as the check on executive power envisioned by the drafters of the Constitution (Eikenberry 13-14).

Without public pressure, Congress does not need to worry about long-term plans or ramifications. They bend and fold with whatever current hysteria is popular in order to be reelected and avoid scrutiny about the validity of their choices. By doing this, they shirk their duties to the United States and the American people and it is made possible for them to do so because of the AVF. The values they are supposed to uphold have been eaten away by their own spinelessness and by a
dispassionate society. Congress no longer proudly serves the American public interest because there is no more American public interest—at least not towards wars. The people do not hold politicians to a higher standard because they feel no personal connection to the military or the soldiers who fight on their behalf. There is an omnipresent admiration for the military forces in American society but no feeling of personal stake in their successes or failures.

Americans are indoctrinated from a young age to have an ironclad respect for the military. Though at first glance, this may seem as though it is positive, it is actually highly detrimental to the continuing progress of the United States. The respect instilled in the breast of every American does not come from a deep reverence and understanding of our military’s history nor the values for which it stands. Instead, it is a tradeoff. It comes from an understanding that by respecting the military, one has paid one’s dues and can no longer be asked to perform the duties of a citizen-soldier. Blind faith and loyalty has absolved the American people of their responsibility for understanding the conflicts the US enters and the consequences these conflicts will have. Without the ability to criticize, something that is handily taken away when unending loyalty is taught from birth and critics are brandished as traitors, the public has lost its finger on the pulse of the military. It is now a separate beast, utterly alien and isolated from the vast majority of Americans.

This has allowed the military to turn into a “private club” of sorts where it is more important to save face than to admit to wrongdoing within the ranks. In “Prayer in the Furnace,” a short story in *Redeployment* by Phil Klay, this is shown when the Chaplain has it hinted to him by Lance Corporal Rodriguez that his company had violated the Rules of Engagement (ROE) in Iraq. The Chaplain attempts to bring this concern to higher positions of authority for an investigation and is denied repeatedly. Major Ekland, a man who previously had been friendly towards the Chaplain turns hostile, arguing that “Weak, strong, it doesn’t matter. You think Lieutenant Colonel Fehr will ever become Colonel Fehr if he tells higher, ‘Hey, we think we did some war crimes’?” (Klay 144). Major Ekland’s response shows that under the AVF, the military focus is on reputation rather than virtuous and successful work. This is only possible because Americans are no longer intimately involved in the war process. They do not examine military actions too closely because that is the bargain they struck when the AVF was implemented.

This has led to what Thomas Ricks calls a “General Failure.” In his article by the same name, Ricks explains that Americans may have been sluggishly criticizing the Bush administration for its sloppy leadership during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars but have not yet begun pointing fingers at the higher military ranks. This does not stem from a valiant military leadership that is wholly without reprove, but from an ignorance of how terribly the generals have dealt with the wars. Again, this is possible because of the AVF. Without a widespread public involvement in the wars, there is no widespread public interest or awareness in the military leadership in the wars. This has had much of the same effect on the military as it had on Congress. Lack of accountability from the people has allowed the military to grow stagnant. As Ricks put it, “Ironically, our generals have grown worse as they have been lionized more and more by a society now reflexively deferential to the military. Relief of generals has become so rare that a private who loses his rifle is now punished more than a general who loses his part of the war” (Ricks 2). The country has now been embroiled in war for longer than ever before, yet because of the AVF there has been no backlash.

The seemingly obvious answer to the failure of the AVF would be to reinstate the draft. However, this kneejerk reaction would cause more problems than it would solve. The American public would be understandably hostile towards anyone who suggested reinstating the draft, especially in the midst of several unpopular conflicts and with a new generation of angry, disenfranchised youths inhospitable to either the government, the military, or both coming of age. A more subtle, sensitive change is required. First and foremost, the social curriculum has to change. Criticism of time-honored institutions has to be not only allowed but encouraged and seen as vital to the progression of the American culture. This will begin to reconnect the public to the military,
particularly when the military responds to those accusations earnestly.

Apathy is bred when one believes he or she cannot change anything. To criticize that apathy and refuse to address the root of the cause for it in the first place is unjustifiable. The next step should be to begin compulsory service to the state. It ought to be a part of having citizenship and in the years before it becomes fully obligatory, the government could sweeten the deal by offering incentives to those volunteering to start their service early. This would soothe some of the anger from the current generation and ease the transition into service. The key part of this service is that it should come with several options. Military service would be an option of course, but opting to fix roads or help the needy should also be equally viable.

This would strengthen the bond of the average citizen and the country, and reignite the spirit of the “citizen-soldier” on which the US was founded. The “citizen-engineers” or “citizen-teachers” would help the country in an equally positive way while allowing a citizen to retain their autonomy and their right to protest war actions. This would serve as a finger on the pulse of the American people, if they largely disagreed with the war at hand or the military’s policies, there would be a large number of people opted into nonmilitary service. This would force the military and government to take notice of the people’s desires while forcing the people to be more aware of what their country is doing in their name. Successful change typically comes from several angles and with no small amount of protests and this would be no exception. There is no argument, however, that the United States of America will prosper if the current method of AVF continues to corrode the American people, values, and development. Change may be difficult but remaining stuck in endless wars is much worse.

Works Cited


