

All-Volunteer Army has Failed, says Boston Globe Op-ed

"War is the great auditor of institutions," the British historian Corelli Barnett has observed. In Iraq, the United States has undergone such an audit and been found wanting. The defects of basic US national security institutions stand exposed. Failure to correct those defects will only invite more Iraqs -- unnecessary wars that once begun prove unwinnable.

The essential guarantor of US national security is the all-volunteer force. In its hey day -- the 1990s -- the all-volunteer force underwrote America's claim to global preeminence. Its invincibility taken for granted, the volunteer force seemed a great bargain to boot. Maintaining the world's most powerful military establishment imposed a negligible burden on the average citizen. No wonder Americans viewed the volunteer military as the most successful federal reform program of the postwar era. What was there not to like?

In fact, questions of efficacy or economy did not figure significantly in the decision to create the all-volunteer force. Back in the early 1970s, the object of the exercise had been quite simple: to terminate an increasingly illegitimate reliance on conscription. During the Vietnam War, thanks in no small part to the draft, the armed services had become estranged from American society. The all-volunteer force creation severed relations altogether.

This divorce had large implications. After Vietnam, citizenship no longer included an obligation to contribute to the nation's defense. Military service became a matter of personal preference, devoid of political or moral significance. Although providing for the common defense remained a primary function of government, federal officials no longer possessed the authority to command citizens to bear arms. Henceforth, they could only encourage young Americans to enlist, offering inducements to sweeten the invitation.

Historically, Americans had viewed a "standing army" with suspicion. After Vietnam they embraced the idea. By 1991 they were celebrating it. After Operation Desert Storm -- with its illusion of a cheap, easy victory -- soldiers like General Colin Powell persuaded themselves that "the people fell in love with us again."

If love, it was a peculiar version, neither possessive nor signifying a

desire to be one with the beloved. For the vast majority of Americans, Desert Storm affirmed the wisdom of contracting out national security. Cheering the troops on did not imply any interest in joining their ranks. Especially among the affluent and well-educated, the notion took hold that national defense was something "they" did, just as "they" bus ed tables, collected trash, and mowed lawns. The stalemated war in Iraq has revealed two problems with this arrangement.

The first is that "we" have forfeited any say in where "they" get sent to fight. When it came to invading Iraq, President Bush paid little attention to what voters of the First District of Massachusetts or the 50th District of California thought. The people had long since forfeited any ownership of the army. Even today, although a clear majority of Americans want the Iraq war shut down, their opposition counts for next to nothing: the will of the commander-in-chief prevails.

The second problem stems from the first. If "they" -- the soldiers we contract to defend us -- get in trouble, "we" feel little or no obligation to bail them out. All Americans support the troops, yet support does not imply sacrifice. Yellow-ribbon decals displayed on the back of gas-guzzlers will suffice, thank you.

Stipulate for the sake of argument that President Bush is correct in saying that failure in Iraq is not an option. Then why limit the "surge" to a measly 21,500 additional troops? Why not 50,000? With the population of the United States having now surpassed 300 million, why not send 100,000 reinforcements to Iraq?

The question answers itself: There are not an additional 100,000 Americans willing to commit their lives to the cause. Even offering up 21,500 finds the Pentagon scraping the bottom of the barrel, extending the tours of soldiers already in the combat zone while accelerating the deployment of those heading back for a second or third tour of duty.

After the Cold War, Americans came to see war as something other than a human enterprise; the secret of military superiority ostensibly lay in the microchip. The truth is that the sinews of military power lie among the people, who legitimate war and sustain it.

For the United States to remain a great military power will require a genuine reconciliation of the military and American society. But this implies the people exercising a greater say in deciding when and where American soldiers fight. And it also implies reviving the tradition

of the citizen-soldier so that all share in the burden of national defense.

Andrew J. Bacevich is a professor of international relations at Boston University. Originally published in the Boston Globe on January 21, 2007.

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Comments

JC Rawley said:

Just as the German General Staff believed after WWI that they lost the war due to a large conscript army, our "general staff" believed we lost Vietnam due to the draft.

Doctrine for the next 30 years has been to limit the size of the military with only those "willing" to serve in the mistaken belief that they would fight "harder" and win more wars.

Iraq shows this to be a fallacy, just as the *** proved the German General staff wrong in WWII.

January 22, 2007 1:46 PM

James Peterson said:

In Bacevich's mind the Iraq war is already lost. He also thinks it is the will of the people that it should be over now. He apparently also agrees with Kerry on why people volunteer for service. From there he draws all of his conclusions. Am I the only one that sees a problem with this?

Nevermind the fact that he has no facts to back up the idea that a volunteer force is worse than a draft. I think the facts actually contradict that idea.

This article just illuminates how deluded the elitist left is. They think there should be a draft so "enlightened" people are part of the military too.

January 22, 2007 4:08 PM

JC Rawley said:

"Elitist left"? Just because he is a Prof from Boston? Don't you think You are jumping to the same conclusions you accuse the writer of?

Historically the fact is that the draft makes governments want to get wars over fast to get their "citizen soldiers" back to civilian life and to become consumers or producers again. As you know about the "volunteer" or "professional army" we get people who are divorced from everyday life in America as much as the Germans and even the Romans were.

January 22, 2007 8:17 PM

TOP said:

This guy is an IDIOT A REAL IDIOT go blow smoke up your own butt you moron.

January 23, 2007 3:12 PM

A.J. Oker said:

The US problems have nothing to do with having a volunteer army. It has to do with a bunch of Yale boys who never heard of Carl von Clausewitz.

Also, the assumption we are losing is a short sighted one. The objective of securing the oil fields has been a success. Also, the suicide bombers in Israel has ceased. As for freedom of the Iraq people. It will take 30+ years to change their culture.

January 23, 2007 3:26 PM

Robert E. Duncan said:

Garbage. Let's talk cause and symptoms. The volunteer military has been a huge success, and I speak from a quarter of a century of first hand experience. I would question the training, professional expertise and objective assessment of any who find otherwise.

The fact that the volunteer active duty military has limits, and that there are even limits on our military force projection capabilities even when augmented with the Reserve and Guard does not mean the concept of a volunteer active duty force is not a success. It simply means that the government must bear in mind the limits of sacrifice our troops (active, reserves and Guard) are willing to endure without a like commitment to hardship and sacrifice by all our citizens.

Most active duty military personnel I know still perceive themselves as citizen first and always, and soldiers as a profession they are presently engaged in.

If we truly believe we have highly motivated, educated, and dynamic people in our military, we should also know that they will make great sacrifices in defense of our country and its national interest, but will eventually vote with their feet and exit the volunteer military forces if they believe an unfair or unjust burden is being placed on them and their families, or if they perceive their sacrifices are not valued by their country.

Bottomline- The volunteer military isn't broken, the problems with morale and limited troop availability are symptoms of the improper matching of mission and forces. To ramble a mite, commitment of the armed forces must be scaled to a scope the active duty armed forces, reserves, and guard are capable of handling and sustaining, or a an increase in troop strength or limited draft will be required. If the expense of an increase in troop strength is too costly, or impractical because of ramp up time, and a limited draft is unsupportable with the American people, the commitment must change. Cost/benefit applies. The costs of disregarding this will be long term and we are all in this boat together.

January 23, 2007 4:00 PM

CWO4 Ed DeGuisto said:

Gentlemen. We still have citizen soldiers. They are the Army and Air National Guard. People like me who work everyday jobs and have to balance the responsibility of military and civilian life. I have a professional career building commercial buildings and also fly helicopters in the Army National Guard. I have been deployed overseas. I have also been called up for missions in the U.S.. I also volunteered to join the military twenty six years ago. I have full contact with the civilian world and the military world. I am not "divorced" from everyday life. I live it. I serve because I'm giving back my time to OUR society for the greater good of OUR country. I am honored to do so. We have a great many things here in this country that do not exist in the rest of the world. Things that most of us take for granted. I have live in other parts of the world. I realize how good we have it. When I read things like this it saddens me. Because many of us here are ignorant to the realities of what life is like outside the U.S.. If life is so great in other countries then why are people killing themselves to get across our borders to live here? A.J Bacevich does make some good points. The majority of the population in the North East is disconnected from the military. But it's not like that everywhere in the U.S.. Many people I meet on a daily basis don't have a clue about what it is to be a citizen of the U.S. let alone be a member of the military. (I grew up and still live in New

York) I am one of "they". So are many other men and women in the military. Active or Reserve. We , you, they, them. It's all the same thing. It is us. Only we can change things for the better.

January 23, 2007 4:11 PM

Kevin T. said:

I live in Boston, I've been to College and Grad School in Boston and I'm enlisted in the National Guard. I don't think I'm the least bit divorced from U.S. Society and I've gotten along perfectly well with most everyone that I've met in the military.

Currently there is no shortage of volunteers, and while the majority of volunteers are white men and women very few are from the 1st or 50th districts. What is upsetting is that so many of the "affluent and well educated" were not raised with any sense of duty or honor towards their country.

I'm glad that our duly elected Commander in Chief has a strong enough will to let us continue to fight for a stabile Iraq. An achievement that will honor our fallen troops. Rather than giving up because the fight got too tough and letting down our troops that have already given their lives to this cause.

January 23, 2007 4:18 PM

D J McGroarty, US Army, Ret. said:

For J C Rawley

Here you go again. Dont you have a life?

January 23, 2007 4:20 PM

JR Gardner said:

I would recommend the author, along with JC Rawley, go talk with the troops directly about what they think about this subject matter.

Many who are serving now, as well as those of us who have served in the past, truly believe that a volunteer military is far superior to which we have seen in recent past, such as during Vietnam where many of those who served were drafted. I believe you will find a majority of those serving now would much rather serve with professional Soldiers, Sailors, Marines and Airmen, who really want to serve their country. Not only is their morale much higher, we would not see the best soldiers leave the military after only one year.

During Vietnam this was especially true, where more seasoned troops were leaving a large void in enlisted leadership ranks. By the time a soldier was coming into his own and proving himself as an up and coming leader they were slated to come home. Losing many in the non-commissioned ranks, or perhaps not being able to fill those

slots due to the way the soldiers were drafted makes it very difficult to carry on successfully in the military, at least in this humble veteran's opinion.

I think if you look hard enough you may also find that perhaps it was not the draft, or lack thereof, which has led to the current public opinion on fighting a more modern war or on the military, but perhaps it was the presence of more TV cameras and reporters that has done so over the past 30+ years. I would agree with the author that there is a rift growing between some of the populous in the country and the military. However, I would not generalize as much as the author and I certainly do not agree that "burden of national defense" will be taken on more equally if we reinstate the draft. One only has to look back to the Vietnam war to see this.

January 23, 2007 4:23 PM

DR said:

I served 20 years in the US Air Force. I was always a citizen first, military second.

I would not want to serve with draftees who did not want to be there. Having served with a few guys over the years who decided, after having volunteered, that they didn't want to be in the military, I know I wouldn't want to be in combat with them. A draftee would be even worse.

We have had two problems with an all-volunteer force -- Congressionally-mandated limits on the size of the military services and low pay.

We need a military probably twice the size it is now. And we need to raise the pay to attract and keep good men and women in the numbers we need.

And we need to properly equip these men and women with the best equipment we can. The procurement process is broken; the much vaunted V-22 Osprey and the F-22 Raptor that active duty units are starting to get are based on technology 20-30 years old.

The draft is a bad idea. The well-to-do will always find a way out. The poor and minorities will be the ones that won't find a way out. It won't level the playing field, it won't give us the quality of troops we need, and it amounts to involuntary servitude.

January 23, 2007 4:29 PM

K. Mike Bradley said:

I still say most people including this author do not get it.
Let's step back a moment and re-analyze where we are and where we want to go.

1. We are engaged in a war on terror. (Not just a war on Al Qaeda. The President has correctly surmised that 9-11 was not an anomaly but the harbinger of things to come. Hence, a war on all who practice or support terrorism).

2. Iraq is key front in this war. (Also correct. We cannot allow any area on this Globe to be a free zone for terrorist training camps and weapons manufacture. We need the cooperation of all governments in this and Saddam's regime would not have cooperated but would have seen our vulnerability immediately after 9-11 and signed up to help crush the great Satan (assuming he wasn't already involved thru financial and logistic support as many still claim is a distinct possibility)).

2a. Step one of the Iraq campaign was to invade and remove Saddam's regime DONE

2b. Step two of the Iraq campaign was to initiate a democracy ... (many of you may well say that the present security situation hampers further development of a democracy and this is true yet a democracy technically exists) ... DONE

2c. Step three IMHO is to address the latest challenge from our enemies outside of Iraq ... the fostering of in-security and in-stability.

We can do this if we are willing to go after and kill Sadar and his militia and strike at Iran for aiding Sadar. As well as go after the Al Qaeda elements more aggressively than we have with all this political bull sh*t from the current Iraqi government holding us back.

If we are not willing to do this then we should relinquish the idea of a stable Iraqi democracy (which is not the end all goal in our Iraqi campaign) and secure vital assets in the region while moving our people out of the urban areas, reducing our casualties which is what drives American frustration with the war.

My overall point is that a democracy is not our ultimate objective and I don't understand why people say we should find a way to stabilize

Iraq or get out. Those are not our only options.

What frustrates me even more is people like this author who accept it as a forgone conclusion that everyone agrees with their position that the Iraqi war is a disaster and we should have never gone there in the first place.

January 23, 2007 4:44 PM

John H. Bedell said:

What do I think? After reading this article by this idiot professor Bacevich and the response of this twit, Rawley, I believe that they are without, not only intelligence, but without guts, and any values that have helped shape and maintain this great country. They evidently don't have a patriotic bone in their bodies, and are lacking sufficient intelligence to even know what is going on in today's world.

They must watch Charlie Gibson and Katie Couric, and read only the Boston Herald and the New York Times to get their daily, leftist feed!! We shortly will be faced with some of the same ilk who seek to become the leaders of this country. And, hopefully there will be enough decent, clear thinking Americans who value what we have here, who will stop these people in their unelected tracks!!!

January 23, 2007 4:57 PM

K. Mike Bradley said:

As to the discussion of a draft I would repeat my post on another article:

"I would like to point out that Congress does not have the constitutional authority to pass legislation establishing a draft.

This would require a Constitutional amendment.

I know many of you are now saying "We have already had two periods in which there was a draft".

We also had internment of all Americans of Japanese ancestry during World War Two, which was just as illegal.

The Federal government (which includes Congress) is forbidden any powers not expressly enumerated in the Constitution.

Our Federal Government has ignored the limits of power, as well as separation of powers for many decades now.

The Framers would have been appalled at the very notion of a draft as I know for a fact they were equally appalled at the pressing of men into the King's service.

General George Washington did not press those who fought for the American Revolution back into service when their term expired.

Many left after two years ... but many more stayed.

The idea that the government could press into service any of its able bodied citizens,
... suspend rights and freedoms,
... place those citizens under a separate "Uniform Code of Military Justice" (which is not under the control of the people as the legislative process is),
... for whatever war the government wanted to fight,
... without any say so by those citizens,
... grants the Government the power to AT ANY TIME eliminate any and all freedoms.

Congress has the power to declare war.

The President has the power and duty to act as commander in chief.

The people have the power to decide whether or not the cause justifies their blood.

This is our ultimate vote and it can never be taken away".

January 23, 2007 5:11 PM

Reverend Charles S. Cavanaugh said:

It would seem that the hemorrhoids are at it again. Being pains in the anus. How soon we all forget...The Civil War was won by the North, with draftees, as well as volunteers. The First World War was won by draftees, as well as by volunteers, as was the Second. The Korean War WAS won by draftees as well as volunteers.

The Viet Nam war was NOT lost by draftees, as well as volunteers (It was lost by a bunch of Washington pukes who had their heads so far up each other that none of them could see the truth; mostly because our "media" was, for some truly unknown reason, determined to tell them lies about what was happening "In Country".)

The "war" in Iraq is over. The objective of the war in Iraq was to punish those who were encouraging, supporting and rendering aid to the jihad terrorists that stepped mightily on our toes in the 9/11/01 incidents. This poppy-*** about losing the war in Iraq, is so ludicrous that it hardly bears the worth of refutation. But apparently, as is obvious by those who are still claiming it, it needs, once again, to be explained. The US declared war on Iraq. The object of that war was to destroy Iraq's ability to wage war on the US. The result of our actions destabilized the Iraqi Government to the point of rendering it non-existent. The result of our actions destroyed a majority of the ability, for what remaining government was not afraid to show their faces, to provide creature comforts to the population (destroying the "infra-structure" of that nation.) The result of our actions destroyed the vaunted Iraqi Army; effectively disbanding it!

That munchkins and fools, is what WAR is all about. Not even a fool, in his right mind could deny that the US Military, made up of volunteers exclusively, (even some "wimmin"), kicked the snot out of just about everyone they wanted to kick the snot out of! They did the same thing in Afghanistan. So ladies, get off the Volunteer Vs. Draftees argument. It is plain and simply horse hockey and not worth the time or thought power it takes to bandy it about.

The primary problem is that Old "Dub" didn't expect our military to do as well, as quickly, so effectively, or so dramatically as they did. In fact, we ended up with a whole bunch of partying to do and no place to do it.

As a result, the peckerheads in Washington, along with their media cousins, had to immediately start screaming that we had to do "something!" With no idea of the social and religious environment, Old "Dub", unfortunately listened to the wrong peckerheads and trumpeted our desire to create a democracy in a people that has for thousands of years been involved in some form of Theocracy. They aren't interested in the rights of their neighbors. They aren't even interested in the rights of their women or children, no less than those of Christians and Jews.

Now comes the hard stuff. We really should be getting out of both Iraq and Afghanistan. They are not interested in democracy or women voting. So, leave them to work out their own problems.

When their solutions become reprehensible and dangerous to us... Go back in and slam them again. It's good practice for our troops and gives them a place to take out their aggression, away from home. How many of you wimps and weasles remember that we suffered more casualties in accidents, in the actual WAR, then we did to enemy action? That our Casualty lists are the result of asking our military to beat their weapons into plow shares and turn their CIBs into bleeding hearts?

Just like "Dub" declared the right war for the wrong reasons, so are you hitting on the right idea of withdrawal, but also for the wrong reasons. It's not because the war is lost, but because the war is WON.... It's over.

We have no further reason to be there!

January 23, 2007 5:56 PM

M VINCE TURNER said:

Well, at first I was not going to jump into this fray but then decided, "What the hell!"

First, from what I know about Andrew Bacevich he is not an elitist, he is not a "northeast liberal" and he is not opposed to the Military. I do know that Bacevich is a West Point graduate and Vietnam Veteran. I believe that lends credibility to his argument even where some readers are in strong disagreement with his thoughts.

Everything I have heard of late indicates our US Military IS stretched to the limits. Generals are admitting to this. Mid-level officers are agreeing with it. The soldiers (generic term for all Forces) are talking about it -- quietly. So, where is Bacevich wrong in this point of the argument?

One of the writers here makes reference to Clausewitz. Some current-day Military say Clausewitz has no application in today's way of waging war. A Marine Corps Captain who served in Iraq told me several months ago that in today's world, Clausewitz is sorely over rated. (And, yes I have my own copy of Clausewitz' book, "On War".)

As to the writer who suggests we went into Iraq to "democratize" Iraq, well perhaps I am just a big ole dufus but that is not the current world history I am familiar with. We went first for WMDs, and when that claim failed, we said we went in because of biochemical weapons; when that failed we decided we had gone in because Saddam Hussein was trying to by material for nuclear weapons. Wow. That one failed too. Ho hum. So, it was "decided" we must have gone into Iraq to create a democracy.

The claim the US went into Iraq because of terrorism is again an interesting assertion, albeit erroneous. From all reports I have read and heard, there was NO terrorist problem in Iraq until AFTER the US went into Iraq. Not before. But, then again, perhaps I am listening to and reading the wrong reports. Ho hum.

As to the all-volunteer Military: Until it was stretched to the breaking point, it was doing an excellent job. I believe that is the point Bacevich is raising in his commentary. He also is suggesting one way to solve this problem is re-introduce the draft. Well, I am sure to get myself into deep you-know-what when I tell you I think we SHOULD have a draft.

Bacevich raises concern over America's negative attitude toward our Military. For whatever reason, that attitude appears to be quite prevalent in the Northeast (despite the fact the Northeast benefits considerably economically from defense industry corporations). Yet, there is decidedly more respect for our Military where there are large installations of Military personnel and their families.

I agree with the writer who states he'd rather be alongside a volunteer in a combat situation, because the volunteer WANTS to be there. Some of my friends in Special Forces say the very same thing, and I understand it fully. However, not every Military assignment is for combat. Using the Marine Corps term "pogues", there are many jobs the "pogues" can do while keeping them out of combat. My experience over the last decade or so is that many if not most young men (and, women, actually) NEED Military training and discipline; especially those at the higher income strata because they feel so "special". That is another point Bacevich raises: the economic disparity between those who do volunteer and those who feel no compelling reason to.

Well, I jumped into this. Too late now to jump out!

January 23, 2007 6:30 PM

Susan Brame/General Mom of "Mom's Troops" said:

As a Blue Star Mom who has been thru two deployments of my son with the 5-7th CAV, I agree wholeheartedly with K. Mike Bradley's comments! Hooaah! I would also like to ask how many of you have been polled in these so called data polls the politicians & news media keep referencing? I have not been in these nor has ANYONE I know! I also challenge any registered voter to watch all the different news media on any given subject & see how many different views they get! Are we as Americans really this stupid to believe all the hipe? Just thought you guys might like the views of a Blue Star Mom that has been recognized by the 7th CAV when they were in Balad, Iraq signed 11/11/2005.
