

Broken Contract: The Limits of the All-Volunteer Army



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In Brief

“To maintain its troop levels in Iraq..., the Army has had to violate its contract with its active and reserve soldiers, use the Guard and Reserve as an operational rather than a strategic reserve, and rely on private contractors to perform military missions.”

- Lawrence J. Korb

One of the lessons of Iraq is that our nation’s All-Volunteer Army (AVA) has suffered significant long-term damage waging a long war it was not designed to fight.

When the Nixon administration ended the draft and switched to the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) in 1973, the service most affected was the Army. For all practical purposes, in the period of conscription that lasted from 1948 to 1973, the Army was the only service that had to rely on the draft to fulfill its manpower needs. (The Marines had to draft small numbers in the waning years of Vietnam and the Navy took in conscripts briefly in the mid 1950s.)

The AVA was to have four components: a comparatively small active force; a strategic reserve consisting of the Army National Guard and Army Reserve which would serve as a bridge to conscription if the nation became involved in a long war; a large pool of draft registrants which could be activated quickly; and private contractors who would take over mundane support functions like food service and routine maintenance.

This structure had two advantages. First, it held down costs. Even though the size of the active Army was reduced, it still was the largest service and thus had the largest payroll. And with the creation of the AVF, the hidden tax of conscription ended and the cost of each soldier rose substantially. Second, a smaller force made it easier for the Army to recruit sufficient numbers of high quality personnel.

After getting off to a rough start, the AVA became a great success. By the mid 1980s, the active duty Army was comprised of high quality men and women. The Guard and Reserve were better trained and equipped than ever. Private contractors had assumed many of the routine support functions freeing up soldiers for combat missions. And after being discontinued briefly during the mid 1970s, draft registration was reinstated and accepted by young men as part of becoming an adult.

The AVA performed very well in the Persian Gulf War. Tens of thousands of Guard and Reserve personnel were activated to support the hundreds of thousands of soldiers deployed to the Gulf. Private contractors provided food service and routine maintenance behind the lines and accounted for about 10 percent of those deployed in the Gulf. Since the war lasted only 37 days and the ground war only 100 hours, there was no need to reinstitute the draft and the reserves were demobilized after about six months.

The second Persian Gulf War – the invasion and occupation of Iraq which has now gone on for almost five years – is another story altogether. To maintain its troop levels in Iraq (as well as Afghanistan), the Army has had to violate its social contract with its active and reserve soldiers, use the Guard and Reserve as an operational rather than a strategic reserve, and rely on private contractors to perform military missions.

According to this social contract, active duty soldiers should get two years between one year deployments and reserves should not be activated more than one year out of six. Today, combat brigades are lucky to get one year between deployments of 15 months in Iraq. Many Guard units have been activated several times since 2001. These reserve units are essentially rotating with active units in maintaining force levels in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2005, 40 percent of the troops in Iraq were from the reserve component. Their number, as a percentage of the force in Iraq, declined and lingered below 25 percent in 2007, but is expected to rise again in 2008.

The results of conducting this long war with an All-Volunteer Army have been devastating for the Army and the country. To meet its needs the active duty Army has had to lower its educational and aptitude standards to unprecedented levels; raised the age for enlistment to 42; shortened enlistments to as little as 15 months; and given bonuses of up to \$70,000 for new recruits and up to \$150,000 to keep soldiers in. Even with these steps, the Army has had to grant moral waivers (including for felony convictions) to more than 10 percent of its new recruits. West Point graduates are leaving the service in numbers not seen in 30 years, leaving the Army short thousands of Captains.

Private contractors outnumber military personnel in Iraq and have had to take on military missions. When performing these missions, some contract personnel have used force so indiscriminately that they have undermined the counterinsurgency strategy.

All of this could have been avoided if the Bush administration had invoked the third pillar of the AVF; that is, reinstating the draft to relieve the strain on the other three pillars. The question should be asked: If keeping some 200,000 troops in Iraq and Afghanistan for more than four years is not enough to activate the draft, then what is? How much damage to the AVA will our political leaders tolerate before dipping into the pool of draft registrants?



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What is IRAQ: Lessons Learned?

Five years into the Iraq war, Americans are left groping for answers. Are we safer? Can America's image be repaired? What are the lasting implications for our Constitution? Historians will spend decades examining this conflict, its causes, its conduct, and its consequences, but those left to grapple with the immediate policy implications must do so without the benefit of the perspective that time can often provide. What lessons should we draw from Iraq today so that we, as a nation, learn from this painful experience? Iraq: Lessons Learned is an initiative to begin answering those questions. The American Security Project asked some of the nation's best minds—military, policy, academic, political, business, religious, media and community—to ponder this question and provide insights from which we can all benefit.

