



# Obesity — An Epidemic that Impacts our National Security



American Security Project



## Perspective

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Lee Cullum, at one time a commentator on the PBS NewsHour and "All Things Considered" on NPR, currently contributes to the Dallas Morning News and hosts "CEO."



### **Nicholas Clark**

Nicholas Clark is the CEO and Executive Director of Alexium International. He is also co-founder and Managing Partner at Viaticus Capital.



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Admiral Fallon has led U.S. and Allied forces and played a leadership role in military and diplomatic matters at the highest levels of the U.S. government.



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### **Vice Admiral Lee Gunn, USN (Ret.)**

Vice Admiral Gunn is the President of the Institute of Public Research at the CNA Corporation, a non-profit corporation in Virginia.



### **The Honorable Chuck Hagel**

Chuck Hagel served as the 24th U.S. Secretary of Defense and served two terms in the United States Senate (1997-2009). Hagel was a senior member of the Senate Foreign Relations; Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs; and Intelligence Committees.



### **Lieutenant General Claudia Kennedy, USA (Ret.)**

Lieutenant General Kennedy was the first woman to achieve the rank of three-star general in the United States Army.



### **The Honorable John F. Kerry**

John Kerry is a distinguished fellow for global affairs at Yale University. In 2013, Kerry was sworn in as the 68th secretary of state of the United States. Kerry served for more than twenty-five years as a U.S. senator from Massachusetts.



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General Lyles retired from the United States Air Force after a distinguished 35 year career. He is presently Chairman of USAA, a member of the Defense Science Board, and a member of the President's Intelligence Advisory Board.



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### **LtGen Norman Seip, USAF (Ret)**

Lieutenant General Norman R. Seip, USAF (Ret) served in the Air Force for 35 years. His last assignment was Commander of 12th Air Force.

## In this Report:

The Congress and the President have tasked the U.S. Military with increasing the number of active duty service men and women. Increasingly, however, recruiters are facing challenges meeting their targets. One big reason is that a growing number of America's youth – the recruiting pool for the military – are obese. It is not an exaggeration to say that, without targeted action to increase nutrition and reduce sedentary behavior, our national security is at risk.

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## IN BRIEF

- Congress and the Trump Administration have enacted an increase in the number of service members in the military.
- The military restricts the recruiting of overweight and obese people because they are unable to meet the requirements of a modern fighting force.
- 71% of the U.S. population of 20-year olds are overweight, while 38% are obese. Someone who is merely overweight could “get in shape” to eventually meet fitness requirements, but those who are obese are unlikely to ever be able to serve in the military, due to their condition.
- The rate of obesity is growing. In order to protect the future fighting force, the President, Congress, and the Department of Defense should take immediate action to:
  1. Increase the level of physical fitness of our youth.
  2. Wean our youth off social media and on to fitness programs.
  3. Expand Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps units nationwide.
  4. Emphasize a healthy diet.
  5. Reauthorize child nutrition programs.

## About the Authors

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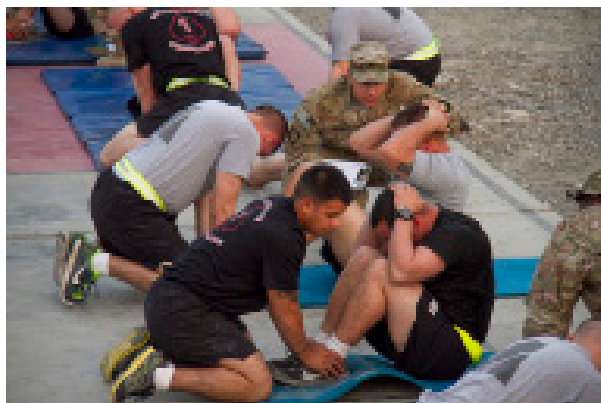
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## Introduction

During the 2016 campaign, then-candidate Trump repeatedly stated that the U.S. military is “a disaster,” that it is “depleted”, and that he would rebuild it.<sup>1</sup> To address this perception and campaign promise, President Trump and the Republican Congress have increased the budget of the Department of Defense and aim to significantly increase the size of our military. Prior to 2017, the U.S. Army’s active duty end strength was on a downward trend – to 450,000 by 2018.<sup>2</sup> But, in 2017, Congress stopped the decline and authorized an increase to 476,000 for that same year.<sup>3</sup> In 2018, the Secretary of the Army increased force size to 483,500 and the plan is to increase the end-strength steadily by 4,000 a year for three years, ultimately reaching a force of 495,500 by 2021.<sup>4</sup> While that 4% increase over 4 years might not seem like much, that burden to increase falls on the recruiting service – one of the toughest jobs in the Army. Consequently, the Army increased the yearly recruiting mission from 69,000 in FY17 to 80,000 for FY18.<sup>5</sup> That figure takes into consideration normal attrition from the service and is necessary to keep the service at the level desired.

But despite the desired increase, the Army cannot meet that figure – and has already decreased the requirement to 76,500.<sup>6</sup> This is a veiled admission that it cannot find enough “qualified military available” (QMA) to fill its ranks. QMA is a basic description of the 17 to 24-year-old men and women who are eligible for enlistment without a waiver of requirements. According to a DoD study, out of a population of about 33.2 million 17 to 24-year-old men and women, 23.5 million would be eliminated from possible enlistment by DoD requirements<sup>7</sup>. Eliminations stem from a variety of factors, including: drug use, lack of education, arrest records, and health factors. Predominant among the health factors considered is what the military calls: “overweight.” 30% of American youth in that age bracket are simply too overweight to serve in our armed forces – a startling figure.<sup>8</sup> This statistic indicates that **obesity is an epidemic**.



US Army photo

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the problem of obesity, understand it as a threat to America’s national security, and to then put forth effective solutions that can solve this problem.

## What is Obesity?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines obesity as “weight that is higher than what is considered as a healthy weight for a given height.”<sup>9</sup> It is determined statistically by Body Mass Index (BMI), which is determined by a person’s weight in kilograms divided by the square of height in meters. A BMI of 18.5 to 25 is considered normal, above 25 is overweight, and above 30 is considered obese. By those measures, an astonishing 71% of today’s 20-year-olds are overweight, while **38%** are obese – a staggering figure.<sup>10</sup> The military will reject a recruit who is classified as overweight, never mind the truly obese. For instance, the Army classifies a 6-foot-tall, 20-year-old male as overweight at 190 pounds, a BMI of 25.8, which conforms to the CDC’s definition for overweight.<sup>11</sup> Regardless, eliminating either 38% (obese), or 71% (overweight), of those in the age groups the military is looking to recruit puts our armed forces at a distinct recruiting disadvantage.

Mission: Readiness (MR), a nonpartisan national security organization of over 700 retired admirals and generals, estimates that more than 70% of today's youth are not fit to serve due to obesity or overweightness, criminal records, drug use, or educational deficits<sup>12</sup>. The CDC overweight figure immediately disqualifies 71% of the QMA for being overweight, and thus it can be contended that the MR figure is actually understated; if other disqualifying factors are included, significantly more potential recruits could be considered ineligible. There is no available statistic on how many overweight candidates had other overlapping disqualifying characteristics. They might also have a criminal record, have used drugs, or lack the education necessary to enlist. But considering that an immediate 70% are not fit to join, singularly based on overweightness or obesity, the possible disqualifications in addition to this renders only a small portion of today's population qualified for recruitment.

Some argue that the standards for enlistment are too restrictive. Experience proves this assumption incorrect. Even among those who do meet the standards to enlist and join, as much as 8% of active duty personnel (those who made it through boot camp) across the Department of Defense later did not meet height and weight standards<sup>13</sup>. Enlisting those who arrive overweight would exacerbate this problem. Others state that physical fitness is not a necessity for everyone in the military. It is well known that those who are overweight suffer from significantly increased health problems, which, if in the military, restricts their availability to perform

their mission or deploy. Today's high rate of deployment puts an increased burden on our servicemen and women, making fitness and weight control an even more critical aspect to their service.

The mission of our Department of Defense is simple and straightforward-- to provide the military with the forces needed to deter war and to protect the security of our country. To do this, the burden is on the U.S. Government to provide the funding to man this force, and the onus is on the Department of Defense to enlist the most qualified men and women. Our men and women serving in today's armed forces are, generally speaking, in fine shape. In this regard, they are equal to, if not better than,



US Navy Photo

any other armed force in the world. All our services have high standards for fitness and weight, and the vast majority of those serving conform to those standards. With no doubt, our active duty members are exceptions to the obesity epidemic.

But the problem that lurks over the horizon is the obesity epidemic among our youth – who become the men and women we must recruit in the near future. The numbers above show no improvement over the past few years, and if the trend continues, there could be little hope of finding enough qualified recruits to adequately man our forces. The rate of obesity is steadily growing.<sup>14</sup> This is a direct threat to the sustainability of our military's manpower – and it is a direct threat to our national security.

## Recommendations — Fixing the Problem

This is not an insoluble case. This does not present the same challenge as finding the cure for cancer or Alzheimer's disease. This is an epidemic for which we know the solution and have a cure. In general, the way to reduce obesity among the broad population is to increase physical activity and to increase the consumption of nutrient-dense healthy food.

### Increase Physical Fitness of Our Youth

*It is our strong recommendation to follow the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' recommendation for 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day.<sup>15</sup> This recommendation should be implemented by all schools as a minimum requirement.*

There is little doubt that our youth of today are overall less physically fit than ever. A report by Science Daily in 2016 ranked the fitness of America's youth at number 47 out of 50 countries.<sup>16</sup> A 2018 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report stated "strong evidence demonstrates that higher amounts of physical activity are associated with increased cardiorespiratory and muscular fitness, and smaller age-related increases in body weight"<sup>17</sup> It went on to further recommend "children and adolescents ages 6 to 17 to do 60 minutes or more of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day."<sup>18</sup> Alas, it found that a substantial percentage of U.S. children and youth do not meet the current federal physical activity guidelines. The H&HS report also makes the connection between sedentary behavior and a heightened propensity to gain weight and connected obesity to those who suffer from a number of maladies.<sup>19</sup> A recent Center for Disease Control article stated:

"In 2014, only 27 percent of high school students surveyed had participated in at least 60 minutes of physical activity per day during the week before the survey, and only 30 percent attended physical education class daily while in school."<sup>20</sup>

There is no doubt that more physical activity needs to be incorporated into our high school curriculums.

### Wean our youth off the social media addiction

The proliferation of iPhones, iPads, computers, and social media has done little to discourage our youth from being sedentary. We view this as an inhibitor to physical activity and one that has definitely had an adverse impact. Anything that weans our children off this dependency can only be good. Limiting time on devices is but one way to do this. Encouraging participation in sports of all kinds is another.

### Encourage the use of fitness "apps" and "Fitbits"

We shouldn't view the proliferation of electronic devices as a scourge – on the contrary, there might be some distinct advantages. There are multiple apps that link to physical activity and there are many devices that track it. If we can propel our young men and women to install these apps, or even buy – or get issued – Fitbit-like devices, then we can perhaps find another form of motivation for them to get fit. We need to encourage their motivation to stay fit, and Fitbit competitions, along with rewards, might be one way to do that.

## Expand Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps Units Nationwide

The military has an intense interest in the physical fitness of our youth and wants them better prepared for the ardors of life in general – not just military life. One way they have been assisting in this effort is through the incorporation of physical training in their Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) programs in high schools. One of the tenants of JROTC is “developing an appreciation of the importance of physical fitness.” According to the RAND Corporation, there were 3,390 JROTC units in our high schools in 2016.<sup>21</sup>

Although exact numbers vary, there are probably over 23,000 public high schools in the United States, and only some 14% have JROTC units.<sup>22</sup> Funding for JROTC comes from a combination of federal funding for textbooks, uniforms and equipment, while the local school districts must pay for teachers and instruction. The Department of Defense spends approximately \$370 million per year on JROTC.<sup>23</sup>

We feel that even that modest increases in dedicated funding from Congress (only some \$5 million from 2017 to 2018) is woefully insufficient to fund JROTC robustly – that at least a total \$400 million should be authorized from the federal government, and, if matched from existing DoD budgets, that number could actually increase to even \$600 million or more. That potentially could increase the percentage to 20 or 25% of schools with JROTC – dramatically increasing the physical fitness of the youth most likely to enlist in the military. Even with increased funding, we may still face the problem of encouraging our students to join those units – the subject for another study.



James F. Byrnes High School junior ROTC cadets in South Carolina. US Air National Guard photo

## Increase Emphasis on Healthy Diet

The formula for weight change across the general population is simple. If you take in more calories than you burn, over time, you will gain weight. The following is from an Aug. 3, 2016 NPR report:

“We’re living at a time when more than 80 percent of Americans fail to eat the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables. At the same time, many Americans overeat refined grains and sugar. This may help explain why the obesity rate seems stuck. The most recent estimate is that 36 percent of adults in the U.S. are obese.”<sup>24</sup>

There have been concerted efforts for several years to improve the diet of our youth, and great progress has been made. We have been concerned about youth nutrition as far back as 1966, when President Johnson signed the “Child Nutrition Act,” initiating the National School Lunch Program.<sup>25</sup> Through the years many government programs have been instituted to improve diet. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service has multiple programs that have been quite successful in improving food service in schools.<sup>26</sup> The fact is, though, obesity remains at near record levels despite these efforts.



## Congress Should Reauthorize Healthy School Food Programs

We believe that continued work by the USDA and the Department of Education on healthy nutrition in schools will aid the effort to counter obesity. Cutting back on any of the programs will only exacerbate an already unfortunate situation.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 has been a success – some 90% of schools report that they are successfully meeting the updated nutrition standards.<sup>27</sup> The authorization for this legislation expired in 2015, but much of the action continues under existing appropriations. Congress should re-examine and continue the emphasis on programs like this one that will lessen the amount of obesity in our youth by increasing the availability of healthier foods as an option. Encouraging Congress to reauthorize child nutrition programs is essential to solving the overall challenge.



USDA photo

## Summary

Obesity is an epidemic that is threatening our national security. Because of this problem, our armed services are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit qualified applicants to man the force – meaning that, downstream, we will be unable to defend our national security interests around the world.

The obesity level among our youth is staggering – as high as 38%. That, combined with those also overweight, means that as much as 71% of our youth are unable to meet the requirements for military service. In this period of increasing demands on our military, we are unable to meet the goals authorized by Congress for our DoD manpower.

The lack of physical activity by our youth contributes to this obesity epidemic. Only 27% of today's high school students participate in at least 60 minutes of physical activity per day during the week – which is the minimum requirement recommended by the Center for Disease Control.

Another contributing factor is the fact that more than 80% of Americans fail to eat the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables.

To increase the pool of acceptable recruits for our military services, ASP recommends:

- Increasing the level of physical fitness of our youth.
- Weaning our youth off social media and on to fitness programs.
- Expanding Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps units nationwide.
- Continuing an emphasis on healthy diet.
- Encouraging Congress to reauthorize child nutrition programs.

We can solve this problem – but it will take a concerted effort from parents, schools, the administration, Congress, and the military to do it.



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The American Security Project (ASP) is a nonpartisan organization created to educate the American public and the world about the changing nature of national security in the 21st Century.

Gone are the days when a nation's security could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor and competitiveness of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with our partners and with all the tools at our disposal and address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this we must forge a bipartisan consensus here at home.

ASP brings together prominent American business leaders, former members of Congress, retired military flag officers, and prominent former government officials. ASP conducts research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them via events, traditional & new media, meetings, and publications.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, energy challenges, and our economic wellbeing. Partisan bickering and age old solutions simply won't solve our problems. America – and the world - needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge that consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities that abound.



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