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OPINIONREVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Pentagon's Recruiting Woes

Fewer young people want or are able to serve, a big problem for U.S. security.

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U.S. armed forces recruiting station.

PHOTO: JOHN MARSHALL MANTEL/ZUMA PRESS

The U.S. Army recently told the press that it missed its fiscal year recruiting goal by 25%, coming up short nearly 20,000 soldiers. For 50 years America has relied on volunteers to defend the country, but that system is a luxury maintained at a cost, and its struggles deserve attention.

The Army's troubles are acute but not unique. The Air Force barely hit its numbers for 2022. The Navy met its targets for enlisted sailors but came up short about 200 officers. Both the Navy and Air Force had to dip into "delayed entry" pools of recruits usually kept in a holding pattern for later, which means the services will start a new recruiting year in an even tougher position. The numbers are worse in the reserves.

Several factors are contributing to the shortfall. Fewer than one-quarter of Americans ages 17 to 24 are eligible to serve, and the reasons for disqualification include obesity, addiction and criminal history. The decision to close high schools during the pandemic kept recruiters at bay and left many teens mentally unwell, another disqualification.

Record job openings and Covid transfer payments hurt enlistment, but the problems run deeper. Fewer than one in 10 youth are inclined to serve, according to survey data. Dismal civic education hasn't helped; teenagers taught to think America is a racist or imperialist country won't wear the uniform.

The left portrays the military as a retrograde institution where sexual assault and extremism are rampant, which is not borne out by evidence. The right's affinity for military service is also in free fall.

Only 53% of Republicans had "a great deal of confidence" in the military in a 2021 Reagan Foundation survey, a 17-point drop in less than a year. Flag officers have too often associated themselves with vogue political causes, promoting books on "anti-racism," for example, as the Navy's top officer did last year. The services may need to relax the Covid-19 vaccine mandate as a concession to reality; thousands of National Guard members have refused it.

The recruiting crisis is an opportunity for Congress to drive a tank over anachronistic practices. That Congress recently saw fit to pass a cash supplement for some service members called a "basic needs allowance" suggests the military's pay scales aren't competitive with the private economy, especially for lower-ranking enlistees. The 4.6% raise slated for next year doesn't match inflation.

The Army toyed with waiving high-school degree requirements and has thrown around signing bonuses of up to \$50,000. But Congress could require the services to experiment with, say, short service contracts or a different benefit mix that might let a service member spend an entire commitment at one home base in between overseas deployments.

The services also rely too heavily on an antiquated "up or out" model that leaves human potential on the table. The Marines deserve credit for realizing, in an initiative called Talent Management 2030, that discharging 75% of its first-term Marines every year and recruiting 36,000 replacements isn't efficient or sustainable.

Congress has offered more flexibility to let those with experience in cyber or other essential fields enter the service at a higher rank. But these are still exceptions. Especially crazy is pushing service members into taxpayer-funded retirement after 20 years of service, when most have productive years left.

A deeper undercurrent is that young people with other prospects won't join a military that looks more hollow all the time. After a decade of mostly diminished budgets, the services have developed a culture of doing more with less, adding stress on equipment and personnel.

Fighter pilots fly fewer than 1.5 sorties a week, according to an estimate from last year, too low to be proficient. The backlog on submarine work means Navy sailors can spend entire tours stuck in the maintenance yards instead of at sea. Ships, aircraft squadrons and Army air defense units are being run ragged by longer or more frequent deployments.

This may explain why fewer veterans are recommending military service. Only 62% of those polled in a 2021 Military Family Advisory Network survey said they'd encourage someone to sign up, down from 74.5% in 2019. This is an ominous trend given the importance of family military legacies.

The recruiting problems are hitting even as the Navy and Air Force need to expand to meet proliferating threats from Iran to China. Tanks and planes aren't worth buying if there's no human capital to man them. Some might be tempted to treat this year's recruiting failures as an anomaly, but it could be an emerging threat to national security. The American experiment can only last as long as citizens are willing to defend it.

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