

Adapt or Decline

Evolving Military Personnel Strategy by Enhancing Flexibility and Permeability

Laura Sanchez Cross



HARVARD Kennedy School
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The Defense, Emerging Technology, and Strategy Program

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About the Defense, Emerging Technology, and Strategy Program

The Defense, Emerging Technology, and Strategy (DETS) program has a dual mission to

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About the Author

Laura Sanchez Cross is a 2024 Army National Security Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School, a graduate of the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College, a Military Intelligence Officer, with a BA in Communications from Boston College, and a Master of Science in Technology and Commercialization from the University of Texas at Austin. She was previously the Senior Intelligence Officer for the 36th Infantry Division (Forward) and the commander of the 636th Expeditionary Military Intelligence Battalion.

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Finally, I am humbled by the dedication and service of the young men and women who continue to serve in our military. This paper is for them, and I hope the policy recommendations herein contribute to making the military a better place for all. Thank you for your unwavering commitment and sacrifice.

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Gen. Joseph Martin, 37th Vice Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, leads a reenlistment ceremony of 3rd Infantry Division Soldiers as they raise their right hands and volunteer to continue their Army service on Hunter Army Airfield, Georgia, March 10. (U.S. Army/Sgt. Andrew McNeil)

Abstract

The United States Military is facing a rapidly changing global security environment. While investments in unmanned weapons systems, high-precision munitions, and artificial intelligence have the potential to reduce some manpower requirements, the military will always need dynamic and resourceful people to rise to each new national security concern. The best way for the military to deal with change and uncertainty is to employ dynamic leaders who can adapt to whatever the future holds. However, with an All-Volunteer Force, the military has no guarantee it can recruit and retain the leaders it most needs. This raises the question: Is the current personnel strategy sufficient to meet the needs of both the military's evolving future requirements and the men and women who will make up that future force? This research concentrates on addressing how the US Army can adjust to the preferences of younger Service Members by enhancing permeability across the components.

Key Words

1. Army

2. Retention

3. Permeability

4. Flexibility

5. Generational differences

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“The competition for talented Americans is fierce, and it is fundamentally different than it was 50 or even 20 years ago. Understanding that reality is key to designing new practices that will make us a more attractive and compelling career choice for young Americans”

- Christine E. Wormuth, 25th United States Secretary of the Army¹

The United States Military is facing a rapidly changing global security environment. Threats abound from near peer competitors and non-state actors. Climate change will be a major destabilizing force for the world.² The widespread use of unmanned weapon systems³ and artificial intelligence⁴ will impact warfare in ways that are difficult to predict. The best way for the military to deal with this uncertainty is to employ dynamic leaders who can adapt to whatever the future holds. However, with an All-Volunteer Force (AVF) the military has no guarantee it can recruit and retain the leaders it most needs. This raises the question: **Is the current personnel strategy sufficient to meet the needs of both the Military’s evolving future requirements and the men and women who will make up that future force?**

The Risk of the Status Quo: Decline

This is not just an academic concern. The military's recruiting chief called 2024 "one of the toughest recruiting landscapes I've seen in over 33 years of service."⁵ The military faces similar challenges with retention.⁶ This is a pivotal time for the US Army. The wars of tomorrow will look vastly different from the wars of yesterday. Our current advantages do not guarantee we'll be the superior force in the future. The Army will need to learn, change, and grow. It cannot do that without retaining our most capable Soldiers. If these issues are not addressed, it could harm the military's ability to react to future national security challenges. The military may have to consider if an all-volunteer force is still sustainable.⁷ As a result, it's imperative to explore new approaches to recruit, engage, and retain the next generation of military leaders. **To maintain an all-volunteer force, the Army will need to adapt its strategy to attract younger service members by increasing permeability among the components.**

How Did We Get Here?

Starting in the 1950s, the United States made the strategic decision to intervene in Vietnam to counter the spread of communism. To sustain its military operations, the US relied on a draft to fill its ranks for the overseas fight. By the end of the conflict over 2.5 million Americans had deployed to Vietnam, 25% of which were draftees. Tragically, the Vietnam War claimed the lives of over 58,000 Service Members (SMs), a loss that reverberated deeply across the nation.⁸ The profound impact of the loss and the draft's widespread unpopularity, catalyzed a shift in military policy. In 1968, Richard Nixon campaigned for the presidency on a platform of promising to end the Vietnam War. Upon assuming office, he formed the Commission on an All-Volunteer Force, which strongly advocated for the discontinuation of the draft. Consequently, on July 1, 1973, the draft law officially expired in the United States as Congress declined to extend it.

Thus, the AVF was born, marking a pivotal moment in American military history. Prioritizing voluntary service over conscription was a crucial step leading to the US military becoming the most professional military force globally. This

expertise is cultivated by a dedicated focus on training and professional education across the force. However, despite its strengths, the AVF model has shown certain vulnerabilities over the past five decades.⁹ Recent years have seen a growing recruiting crisis, casting doubt on the AVF's ability to consistently attract enough volunteers to sustain itself. Moreover, the AVF has inadvertently contributed to a widening gap between the civilian population and those who serve in the military. According to Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen H. Hicks, the number of military veterans in the US has dropped from 18% to approximately 7% of the population. This reduction in direct ties between the military and the general population makes it increasingly challenging for Americans to understand and appreciate the unique military way of life.¹⁰

Since the shift from compulsory service to a volunteer force, there has also been a change in the demographics of America and its military. Younger generations now make up most of our nation's service members, and each new generation comes with a new set of values, priorities, and family dynamics. Millennials make up 82% of the entire US Army¹¹, and 35% of all junior officers¹² are Gen Z. Millennials, born between 1980 and 1996, and Gen Z, born between the mid-1990s to early 2010s, grew up during a time of rapid technological advancement, including the rise of the internet and the proliferation of digital technology. They are often characterized as having a strong focus on work-life balance and valuing flexibility and experiences over material possessions. They still have a sense of service but must strongly believe in the cause. If these characteristics hold true, military service should resonate well with younger generations, yet the data suggests otherwise.

In a recent study, conducted by the Office of People Analytics at the Department of Defense (DoD), revealed a concerning trend: the propensity for youth to join the military continues to decline. Specifically, when surveyed about their likelihood of serving in the military within the next few years, younger generations showed a tendency to avoid military service. The likelihood of serving decreased from 17% to 9%. When examining responses based on race and ethnicity, all groups except for Black respondents showed a decreased willingness to serve, with declines ranging from 11% (Hispanic) to 2% (Asian). While fluctuations in the desire to serve have been observed throughout history, the prevalence of responses indicating “probably not” or “definitely not” are notably low. Among the top reasons cited for not joining

the military, 58% expressed a reluctance to leave their friends and family, while 38% cited concerns about living in unfamiliar locations.¹³

Recruitment is only half the battle. Even if they join the service, the military can't always keep them. Recent DoD Career Engagement Surveys echo the same apprehensions that deter many from joining the service. The surveys found that Soldiers leave the Army primarily for family concerns.¹⁴ Unlike senior leaders, younger Service Members are less willing to forgo family commitments.¹⁵ Since the late 1960s, the rate of two-career households has increased by 43%, and in eight out of ten couples both partners are expected to work and support their families.¹⁶ The top reason cited by leaders leaving the military is the "Impact of Army life on my significant other's career plans/goals."¹⁷ The rigid nature of military service can often make supporting a family challenging. Since families play a significant role in the decision of whether Soldiers join the military and continue to serve, the Army must look for ways to make it easier to serve and support a family.

Retention Recommendation: A Flexible Service Program

If the Army can recruit more personnel, it will also have to focus on innovative ways to retain them based on the generational differences highlighted above. Young leaders want to feel included and have agency over their careers. The military can better leverage its National Guard and Reserves to keep top leaders serving. **I propose the Army create a Flexible Service Program that allows Soldiers to easily transfer between the Active, Reserve, and Guard components.** This idea, also known as permeability, will allow Soldiers to serve in a capacity that fits their stage of life. Instead of exiting the military to build a family or take advantage of a civilian job opportunity, Soldiers in the program can transition from full time service to a part time position. If their life circumstances change, they can easily pick back up on active duty. This will help retain existing talent and allow the Army to take advantage of the skills part time Soldiers are learning in the civilian world.

This recommendation is not new. The Army National Guard tried to address this topic under the Army's Defense Officer Personnel Management Act in 1980 and later in 2017, but the changes did not make the finalized policy. The current process to transfer between Army components takes several months, requires multiple approvals, and extensive coordination between Active, Reserve, and Guard strength managers. A Soldier with a sick parent or civilian job offer cannot wait around six months hoping their transfer request is approved. With a force that highly values family and flexibility, it is imperative that the transfer process is streamlined and predictable.

Benefits to a Flexible Service Program

While there are numerous benefits to instituting a flexible service program, perhaps the biggest benefit of increasing flexibility between the Active and Reserve Forces is strategic. Permeability has gained renewed attention from policy leaders at the Pentagon as they look to optimize their Total Force Policy (TFP) in response to the shift in priorities outlined in the National Defense Strategy (NDS). The current iteration of the TFP was primarily tailored to regulate Reserve Component operations associated with the global war on terrorism. However, given the evolving landscape, a comprehensive update is imperative to ensure that our Active, Reserve, National Guard, and civilian forces are well-positioned to address present and future challenges effectively. The Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, in collaboration with the Secretaries of the Military Departments, is actively engaged in identifying, developing, modernizing, and implementing policies aimed at mitigating, reducing, and eliminating barriers that impede the Total Force from achieving maximum effectiveness in global strategic competition. Among the nine guiding principles guiding this effort is the recognition that 'Modernized and agile personnel policies, processes, and systems enhance permeability and harness the talent of our Total Force.'¹⁸ These are not just strategic imperatives, but necessities to safeguarding our nation's security interests. The benefits derived from a cohesive and adaptable Total Force are paramount to ensuring the readiness and resilience required to confront the

dynamic challenges of the contemporary security landscape, thereby reinforcing the indispensable role it plays in upholding our national security.

Enhanced permeability also offers numerous advantages in addressing the younger generations' needs for increased autonomy in both their personal and professional lives. Additionally, it has the potential to bolster long-term retention rates and address the prevalent issues affecting military recruitment discussed previously.

Recent studies indicate that Gen Z individuals are characterized as “job hoppers,”¹⁹ a trend that poses a challenge to the traditional structure of the military. While the Army primarily operates on terms dictated by its own needs, accommodating the lifestyle preferences of this generation could prove beneficial. With 97% of Gen Z respondents considering work as part of their identity, factors like a healthy work-life balance, job satisfaction, meaningful work, and career development are prioritized over salary. Although the DoD has taken incremental steps like offering flexible work schedules, healthcare packages, and pay raises, these measures may fall short in ensuring long-term retention of Gen Z workers. Initiatives like the Blended Retirement Program and hybrid working models are steps in the right direction, but progress is slow. To attract and retain Gen Z individuals, the military must align with their life preferences while still fulfilling its mission. Addressing these challenges is crucial to mitigate the recruiting crisis and improve retention rates. However, substantial changes are necessary to effectively address the unique needs of Gen Z within the military.

The importance of this flexibility was illustrated during a recent hearing before the House Armed Services Committee, where both Secretary of the Army Christine E. Wormuth and Army Chief of Staff General Randy A. George testified about the Army Department's fiscal year 2025 plans. GEN George disclosed a historic shift: over 25% of new recruits are now choosing their initial duty stations, a previously unavailable option.²⁰ This statistic underscores the growing recognition within military leadership that increased flexibility in personnel management strategies is essential for meeting recruitment goals, particularly amidst a tight civilian job market. This emerging trend finds further support in observations within the Texas National Guard, where recruiters have noted a departure from the traditional ‘I joined the Army to travel’ mentality. Instead, an increasing number of recruits express a strong preference to remain close to home, signaling a fundamental shift in the priorities of young individuals considering military

service. Secretary Wormuth's commitment to identifying effective incentives and adapting to these shifting preferences is noteworthy. By acknowledging and accommodating the desire for stability and proximity, the military is better positioned to attract and retain talent. The introduction of flexible service programs thus represents a strategic alignment with the evolving needs and aspirations of prospective recruits.

Barriers to a Flexible Service Program

The benefits of increasing permeability are important, but there are political, institutional and cultural concerns that will need to be addressed. The first obstacle is that Congress must agree on several legislative changes. However, recent events suggest Congress may be receptive. In early 2023, Congress allowed the Select Service law, which governs the draft, to lapse. Congress' reluctance in addressing legislation regarding the draft indicates members of Congress would likely be open to changes that help ensure the sustainability of the all-volunteer force.

The first step Congress could take is to revise the appointment procedures for Regular (Active Duty) and Reserve Officers. Currently, Regular and Reserve Officers take a slightly different oath of office upon joining. When transitioning between the two components, officers must retake the other oath. Additionally, each transition requires Presidential appointment and Senate confirmation. These two steps add a significant time delay and administrative burden without providing any real value. Congress could streamline this process in the next National Defense Authorization Act by updating Section 531(a) of Title 10, United States Code, Original Appointment of Commissioned Officers to allow a unified oath of office for both Regular and Reserve officers and by giving the President authority to approve Regular and Reserve component transitions without the need for Senate confirmation. The President could delegate this authority to the Secretary of Defense for an even more streamlined process and greater flexibility in talent management.

In addition to political challenges, the Department of Defense can improve military retention strategies by addressing the appointment process while still meeting the Departmental requirements imposed by Congress. As mentioned above, the process is cumbersome and administratively burdensome, with high error rates due to package differentiation and lack of automation.²¹ DoD can direct all services to standardize the appointment and promotion scroll processes for intercomponent transfers, using an automated system modeled after the Air Force Recruiting Information Support System (AFRISS). AFRISS allows the Department of the Air Force to collect, process, manage, and analyze all potential enlisted and officer applicants across all three Air Components. For example, officers separating from the Active component may not decide to transfer to the Reserve components until close to the end of their service commitment. A modernized personnel management system should include innovations like automatically triggering a reserve appointment scroll one year prior to separation. This would standardize and prepare all non-retiring officers or those without unfavorable information files for potential transfer, facilitating quicker transitions to the Reserve Forces without affecting manpower end strengths. Additionally, increasing automation through data processing and error-avoiding rulesets can further enhance retention. Currently, each component manages its personnel strength insularly, but a holistic approach is needed. One component's loss can be another's gain, ultimately bolstering national security by ensuring the seamless transfer and retention of skilled personnel across all service branches.

Aside from implementing policy changes, an Officer Career Management RAND Study found that the most prevalent constraints on potential officer modernization are cultural. A resistant culture can slow large-scale change in ways that are hard to quantify.²² Achieving true permeability between Regular and Reserve Forces (Army Reserves and National Guard) requires cultural buy-in that all components are co-equals and two sides of the same force. Currently there is a perception that Active Duty is for the true professionals while the Reserves Forces are for “weekend warriors”.

That perception is shifting, however. The operational requirements for the Reserve Forces have reached unprecedented levels, reflecting the evolving demands of the 21st century. These demands have shaped the role and utilization of the Reserve Forces, prompting shifts in policy, processes, and programming. The transition began with Guard and Reserve support and augmentation of Regular Army units

during peacetime operational rotations, such as Operation Desert Spring in Kuwait and kicked into overdrive during the global war on terror. For example, the chart below illustrates the significant rise in National Guard mobilizations, soaring from as few as 7,000 in 2015 to a peak of 102,000 activated in 2022.²³

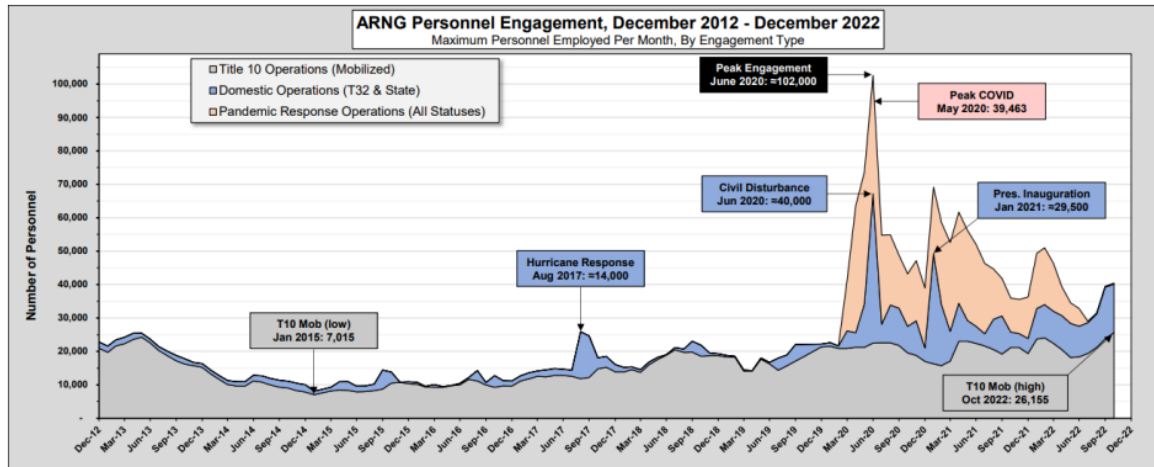


Figure 4. “Sands of time” chart showing activations over the last 10 years

This fifteen-fold increase in activations and deployments has significantly increased the experience, readiness, and professionalism of Reserve and National Guard forces, making them as prepared as active-duty forces for current operational challenges.²⁴ This increased operational tempo is likely to continue. While operations in the Middle East have decreased, the threat from potential adversaries, such as Russia or China, have increased. Domestically, Reserve Forces have responded to an increased number of incidences of civil unrest and natural disasters.²⁵

And more importantly from a cultural perspective, these activations have dramatically increased the interactions between Regular and Reserve Forces. Active Duty Service Members have seen Reserve Service Members in action, often performing the same mission, and know they are capable and competent. The mobilizations serve as cultural immersion activities which have been shown to challenge personal views and prompt the reevaluation and reconstruction of self-identity.²⁶ This fits in with Jack Mezirow’s transformative learning theory. As individuals are exposed to new information, they are also evaluating their past ideas and understanding. Through critical reflection, they shift their worldview as they obtain new information. Ultimately, this familiarity will greatly reduce cultural concerns about increased permeability between components.

Future Research Opportunities

Further research could prove valuable in addressing recruiting and retention challenges within the entire DoD organization, particularly in civilian service and employment. My exploration of permeability suggests there could be benefits in increasing the level of cooperation between the DoD and the civilian sector. A recent RAND study revealed that less than 2% of technology workers in Silicon Valley have ties to the military, resulting in limited interest in careers supporting the government due to low levels of trust and personal connections with the military.²⁷ These findings underscore the potential for misunderstandings between the DoD and the high-tech community and present opportunities for increased collaboration and mutual understanding. Enhancing opportunities, such as reverse internships, could enable experienced tech experts to learn about the DoD's mission and explore how their expertise can contribute to solving national security challenges. Furthermore, these partnerships and interagency collaborations can improve the military's understanding and improve recruiting as well.

During my research, I noticed other areas where streamlining congressional mandates could provide a large benefit. At the Harvard Business School and MIT Sloan Technology and National Security Conference in March 2024, Bryant Parmeter, Chief Talent Management Officer for the DoD, highlighted the process of bringing in a civilian employee to the DoD. It takes over 90 days due to the number of required administrative steps, and the timeframe is substantially longer if the new employee needs a security clearance. However, 32 out of the 40 required administrative steps are mandated by Congress rather than the DoD. These steps slow down the recruiting and hiring process making it more difficult for the DoD to attract top civilian talent. This parallels some of the administrative burdens the uniformed services would face when increasing permeability between components. A thorough review and analysis of all congressional mandates regarding DoD personnel management would likely be a useful exercise. This study could consider which mandates no longer provide a value greater than their administrative burden.

Conclusion: Adapt or Decline

Fifty years ago, the US military had a choice to make: how to fill its ranks after a bloody and unpopular war. It was not an easy choice or transition, but military leaders knew a draft was no longer tenable. America had changed, and the military needed to change with it by transforming into an all-volunteer force. This evolution enabled the US military to become the most capable and professional fighting force in the world.

Today, America has continued to change, and the military must follow suit again. The old methods of recruitment and retainment are not as effective as they once were. The military must adapt or risk decline. Young Americans have different wants and needs. Many strongly value increased flexibility in their lives. That is why the Army should do its part and allow streamlined transitions between full-time and part-time force components. These changes are necessary for the Army to sustain a resilient and adaptable force.

While investments in unmanned weapons systems, high-precision munitions, and artificial intelligence have the potential to reduce some manpower requirements, the Army will always need dynamic and resourceful people to rise to each new national security concern. Our Service Members want stability and flexibility. It does not take a lot of money to provide this, but it does take vision, leadership, and determination. The right leaders are in the highest positions of the military to make this happen. Army Secretary Wormuth's 6th objective is "to strategically adapt the way we recruit and retain talent into the Army in order to sustain the all-volunteer force."²⁸ Her vision requires the Army to adapt and find new ways to retain talent. It is often said that the Army's biggest asset is its people. Now is the time to prove that by investing in our Soldiers.

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