An argument for action

WE finally are engaged, as a nation, in the debate that should have taken place five years ago, before the decision was made to experiment with an All-Volunteer Force.

National leaders might have reached the same conclusion had the debate occurred then, but the nation would have comprehended far better the hazards, problems and potential costs of abandoning the draft. It is widely regarded today that the momentum built to terminate the draft and rely instead on volunteers was based on the most superficial of evaluations. It was largely a product of anti-Vietnam war hysteria. Senator Sam Nunn, chairman of the Armed Services Subcommittee on Manpower and Personnel, aptly expressed it while opening hearings on the issue recently: "In my opinion, the draft card burnings, campus riots, draft evaders, and sti-ins of that era had more to do with the decision to end the draft than did any careful analysis of the merits of the AVF."

Even the Gates Commission study, which was presented to the nation as an objective, exhaustively researched analysis, was seriously flawed by wishful thinking and overly-optimistic "guessimates." Many of its most basic assumptions turned out, in retrospect, to be invalid. Two examples among many:

- The Commission findings were based on a perceived need for 280,000 new enlistments each year for armed forces of 2.1 million. The annual turnover has been far greater, and the actual requirement has turned out to be between 400,000 and 470,000 annually, more than 50 percent higher.

- The study also assumed continued existence of an "effective standby" through which the Armed Forces could quickly commence an emergency expansion. In actuality, the Selective Service machinery has been driven so deeply into "deep standby" that it would take seven months following some future Day-D to produce the first increment of 100,000 trained individuals for the Armed Forces.

Now, it is quite apparent even to the uninformed that the AVF is in trouble. The Active Services -- particularly the Army -- are experiencing difficulty in attracting a sufficient number of volunteers. Moreover, there has been a small but indicative downturn in the overall level of those volunteering for the National Guard and Reserves, which play a far more critical defense role today than they did a few years back, are hard hit by both manpower loses and a sharp decline in the mental level of those they recruit.

The Selected Reserve dropped from 810,770 down to 823,260 in just the last two years, a loss of 76,441! The Army Guard and Army Reserve, hardest hit, now stand at about 500,000, as contrasted with a post-intervention requirement of 660,000 and a wartime "structure strength" of 700,000. They can't rely on the IRD (Individual Ready Reserve) for Mc-Day fillers to fill that huge gap as a "template," either, for the IRD is plunging rapidly downward to extinction! The Army estimates its IRD will be short an estimated 380,000 trained individuals by 1982 unless drastic measures are taken soon.

The rapidly-increasing cost of military personnel likewise helped prompt the long-deferred AVF debate of 1977. Personnel-related costs consumed nearly 60 percent of the defense budget last year and will drop only slightly, percentage-wise, in FY 1978. Many political leaders believe some form of compulsory service would be less costly than the AVF, though we must concede in all honesty that actual savings probably would fall considerably short of perception.

However, if it were necessary to expand our Armed Forces significantly in response to a major emergency, the cost might very quickly become unbearable. Even the Gates Commission estimated the cost of a three-million-member force in the 1977-79 timeframe would be $4 billion more than our present 2.1 million force. More recent estimates (and probably more accurate as well place the costs for such a force at an added $12 billion! That's only for armed forces comparable to those we maintained during the Vietnam War. Think how much more would be required for a full-scale invasion of some other country or emergency!

It's time to review the AVF experience, as these and numerous other factors clearly suggest, and Senator Nunn should be commended for initiating such a review. It's time to ask if the volunteer system is working if not, why not? We need to examine alternatives to AVF. Should we revert to straight conscription? Would some form of national service better serve our needs? Or can AVF be made to fulfill our requirements with some carefully-designed alterations?

In the meantime, the Guard and Reserve cannot wait for the long and careful consideration such a review implies. We need help now to restore our readiness levels. This Association — along with others representing the entire Guard/Reserve community — strongly urges Congress to provide recruiting/recruitment incentives. Our recommendation: educational assistance to attract nonprior service enlistees, and a cash re-enlistment bonus to encourage retention. If incentives are not provided quickly, Reserve Component strength very likely will drop to a point from which recovery will be impossible without a costly and time-consuming "crash" effort. Until Guard/Reserve strength is restored, our national ability to defend ourselves is weakened.

If the AVF review produces a decision to stick with the volunteer system, such incentives unquestionably will be required for the long haul. If that review produces a decision to adopt some form of compulsory or national service, use of the incentives can be discontinued.

Push on with your review, Senator! It's long overdue! But in the meantime.

The Guard and Reserves need help now!

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