All-Vol due for rethinking

FORMER Congressman F. Edward Hibbert, while chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, liked to tell All-Volunteer Force advocates: “If this nation wants All-Volunteer forces, it will have to draft ‘em.”

In less pungent language, Senator John C. Stennis, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, says the same thing: “Like it or not, we’re going to have to go back to the Selective Service System for obtaining some of our men. The quicker we realize that and get to the people the better.”

And Senator Sam Nunn, whose influence on military affairs is expanding rapidly, says: “The All-Volunteer Force is now operating on the ragged edge of viability, with mushrooming recruiting costs, unacceptable rates of attrition, serious shortages of skills (especially those of doctors), shortages in qualified vehicle and communica-tions operators, seriously under-manned, lower-quality reserve forces.”

On the other side of the issue, administration officials and pro-AVF members of Congress have been using every available forum to proclaim the All-Volunteer Force as a huge success. Their effort to sell AVF to the American public has been so intense that if often has drowned out the voices of critics.

Senator Edward W. Brooke, for example, says: “The AVF is clearly meeting its intended purpose of providing the military manpower necessary for national security in a manner compatible with national traditions at acceptable cost.”

And Maj Gen Eugene P. Forrester, commander of the Army Recruiting Command, asserts: “With four years’ experience, we are making the Active-All Volunteer Army work; we have been able to meet our quotas consistently.”

What Senator Brooke and General Forrester say is not as crucial to the debate as what they omit or gloss over. In the general’s statement, the term “Active” should be there under-scored. As far as meeting the needs of the Reserve forces is concerned, the All-Volunteer Force has been an utter disaster — and any system that does not provide adequately for the Guard and Reserves is not for the Active force, it is a failure and not acceptable.”

Senator Nunn points out in a recent paper that any intelligent discussion of the AVF must recognize that “the AVF is to a large extent a political child of the draft card burnings, campus riots, and violent protest demonstrations of the late 1960s and early 1970s.”

It was indeed and, while that alone does not make it “devoid of merit,” as the senator points out, it does suggest that a reassessment in those less tumultuous times is warranted.

Moreover, General Forrester’s last comment should have a small but important sequel: “...we have been able to meet our quotas constantly up to this point!”

In the search for quality, quantity has started to fall off in Active recruiting. Guard and Reserve recruiting has fallen far behind in both quantity and quality. Attrition is shockingly great. Forty percent of those who enlist in the Active services quit before they complete their first hitch. That’s 150,000 out of a total year’s crop of 400,000.

In the Army Guard, 43.8 percent currently are dropping out before ending their first term. Those attrition rates represent an appalling loss in money and time, by command, recruiters, and trainees.

What is glossed over by AVF proponents is that the idea was born, and the concept nurtured through its first five years, in a highly favorable environment — high unemployment, ample numbers of eligible males in the population, a rapidly shrinking Active military establishment, and escalating military pay scales. Look only a short way into the future, however, and the prospects for a voluntary military grow bleak.

The number of 17- to 21-year-old males will drop rapidly in the next decade, from 2.15 million down to 1.7 million in the 1980s. Competition for manpower will intensify and the cost will rise with demand. Unemployment is slowly easing. The military establishment has levelled off in size. Public pressures may make it unlikely that military pay will fall to more than double current civilian levels and perhaps not even that.

These points and many others are dwelt on in articles elsewhere in this issue. One article reviews the performance of the AVF concept and its prospects for the future. Another article reports on the manpower predicament in which the Guard and Reserve find themselves at the AVF’s five-year mark. And two Wisconsin company commanders discuss recruiting-renegotiation problems in a third article.

Those of a pragmatic turn of mind will say that it is no longer politically feasible to return to the draft system of old. Perhaps they are right. Some form of mandatory national service, with the military as one option, often has been suggested, but ruled out too complex or too costly. Perhaps the idea deserves a closer examination. Most certainly, the AVF in its current format is not the answer.

A thorough rethinking of how we’ve to provide for the nation’s military manpower — and manpower requirements is badly needed.

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The National GUARDSMAN is published monthly, except August, by the National Guard Association of the United States, with editorial and advertising offices at 1 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001. Telephone (202) 347-5041. Second class postage paid at Washington, D.C.; and at additional mailing offices. Copyright 1976 by the National Guard Association of the United States. All rights reserved. All members of the NGAUS receive the GUARDSMAN. Nonmember subscriptions: $3 per year domestic; $4 per year foreign. Bulk rate for 100 or more copies to the same address: $2.50 each. Single copies 50c. The GUARDSMAN welcomes original articles bearing national defense with emphasis on the National Guard. Illustrations and artwork must be accompanied by return postage. No responsibility is assumed for safe handling. Opinions expressed by correspondents do not necessarily represent official NGAUS positions or policy. Likewise, publication of advertising cannot be deemed endorsement thereof by this Association or its members.

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Cover: Feeding the manpower appetite of the nation’s military establishment — especially on the Guard’s basis — is the subject of this month’s story cover. Cover design by Bill Duff.

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