



**NATIONAL COMMISSION ON MILITARY, NATIONAL, AND
PUBLIC SERVICE
MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD**

Subject: Testimony of Major General Dennis Laich, US Army, Retired, on March 16, 2018

The following is a record of a meeting between Commissioners and MG Dennis Laich, which took place on March 16, 2018, at the Crystal City offices of the Commission. At the meeting, the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) and Selective Service were discussed. The conversation was moderated by Chairman Heck and included all commissioners present for the March meeting. Other Commission employees observed at least part of the meeting. Please note that the following is not a verbatim transcript of the discussion.

MG Laich opened with prepared testimony, a copy of which has been submitted for the record. The testimony may be found in Appendix A. Below are notes from the Commissioner's question and answer period with MG Laich as recorded by research staff.

Presenter: Major General Dennis Laich, US Army, Retired

Key Takeaways:

- MG Laich argued that the AVF is unfair, inefficient, and unsustainable.
- MG Laich recommended the Commission discuss modifications to the draft, the Selective Service System (SSS), and volunteer/conscript models as a means of mitigating the AVF's unfairness, inefficiency, and unsustainability and moving the conversation past the lens of fear, apathy, ignorance, and guilt through which, according to MG Laich, the American people view the military.
- According to MG Laich, one possible model for conscript augmentation to the volunteer force might be offering the following options to draftees:
 - Join the active component US Army/US Marine Corps for 2 years following Basic/Advanced Individual Training
 - Join the Army National Guard or US Marine Corps Reserve for 6 years following Basic/Advanced Individual Training, with a caveat that if the individual deploys once, his/her obligation is fulfilled
 - Attend college and serve in a reserve officer training corps (ROTC).

Meeting Discussion

MG Laich opened the conversation by reading his prepared testimony. He expanded on his written testimony with the following points:

- While discussing the unfairness of the AVF, he noted the U.S. Army spent \$424 million in enlistment bonuses last year - bonuses which are more attractive to lower socio-economic quintiles.
- The U.S. has never had a mobilization without conscription.
- He highlighted 2005-2007 as a case study of the AVF under strain, recalling the debate about “breaking the force.”

Joe Heck opens the discussion by asking if mass mobilization is fair, as in the past those who had resources were able to circumvent the lottery. He asks if MG Laich is assuming mobilization would happen with no waivers/no exceptions as a prerequisite for fairness. Additionally, he asks about sustainment: if the end strength is fixed, how does the means of accession change the cost?

MG Laich replied that there has never been a draft that was “fair,” although he does assume no waivers/no exceptions as a component of fairness. He cited the example of the Civil War draft, during which Union legislation provided for substitution/commutation. He did acknowledge that the World War I and II drafts were viewed as fair, as was the latter part of the Vietnam War draft. The difference between today and the AVF prior to 1973 is that the nation has institutionalized unfairness, citing the bonuses paid to recruits in 2007 as an example.

Turning to sustainability, MG Laich claimed the full lifecycle costs are staggering. Citing a study conducted by the Reserve Forces Policy Board, he recommended reducing the size of the United States Marine Corps (USMC) and United States Army (USA) active component end strength and using more robust Guard/Reserve as one means of reducing cost. Additionally, he recommended eliminating recruitment bonuses (\$424 million for the Army in 2017) and reducing the size of recruiting commands, citing one of which for the Army is 9,000 personnel. He estimated this at \$75 billion in savings, as identified in his book [Skin in the Game](#).

MG Laich explained that he is proposing conscripts be given three choices:

- Join the active component US Army/US Marine Corps for 2 years following Basic/Advanced Individual Training
- Join the Army National Guard or US Marine Corps Reserve for 6 years following Basic/Advanced Individual Training, with a caveat that if the individual deploys once, his/her obligation is fulfilled
- Attend college and serve in a reserve officer training corps (ROTC).

MG Laich argued the advantages of this system include that it is resistant to the effects of low unemployment, and that DoD may actually raise overall standards by gaining access to the quality recruits who are “college linebackers and national merit scholars,” a pool of talent which are currently “lost.”¹ He also suggested that many of the service members who develop PTSD and other downstream issues come into the military with risk factors, implying that these individuals could instead be screened out. He further posited that conscription is a form of competitive advantage for the United States Government and a matter of law since 1917.

¹ He supports this as 4 million people residing in America turn 18 every year, of which only 30% are eligible and only a further 15% are propensed, arguing that results in approximately 180,000 a year who are both willing and able as compared to military recruiting goals of 120,000 to 140,000. Conscription would give access to 1.2 million.

Janine Davidson asks for MG Laich's experience talking to military leaders who claim they do not want conscripts because of training and morale issues - or the operational counterargument that given the nature of warfare today, this might erode our combat power.

MG Laich highlighted his retired status as a distinguishing feature freeing him to discuss policy alternatives to the DoD and Congressionally supported AVF. He noted that the conscripted military only lost one war (Vietnam). He affirmed that the military has the inherent leadership skills capable of mitigating the issue of low draftee morale. He reiterated that the military is already dealing with issues related to attrition and servicemembers who go absent-without-leave (AWOL). He reiterated that drawing from 1.2 million eligible as opposed to 180,000 eligible and propensed will lead to higher academic performance and intellectual capacity.

Steve Barney asks for MG Laich to expand on his argument that the nation would be less inclined to engage in foreign wars if its citizens paid a higher cost.

MG Laich argued that the impact of conscription on U.S. foreign policy rests on bringing “skin in the game.” He contrasted this with his “most controversial line” from his book, notably that Americans view the military and broader national security through a lens of fear, apathy, ignorance, and guilt. He explained that he sees the broader population refusing to change, pay, or bleed for their military and as a consequence the U.S. government has engaged in foreign conflicts five-times more often from 1973-2011 than between 1949-1973.²

Ed Allard asks MG Laich for his thoughts regarding women in the draft and Selective Service System (SSS) registry.

MG Laich noted he is “all for it” [registering women in the SSS], although he notes that drafting women would be more controversial. He highlighted that Service Women’s Action Network is in favor,³ as are some members of the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS).⁴ MG Laich continued that the integration of women in the military today is one of the most positive features that came out of the AVF, noting the active component is 15% female and “to a person they do a great job.” That said, he felt that most women do not have the same strength and cardio capacity that men have, concluding that that in itself is not a good reason to preclude drafting women but it is worth ensuring standards are preserved. His overall assessment is that the U.S. cannot field an effective military today without women being a part of it.

² Citing Karl Eikenberry: https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/TWQ_13Winter_Eikenberry.pdf

³ SWAN is in favor of including women if modifications are made to SSS registration; their overall position is in support of debate to eliminate the draft/SSS entirely. <https://www.servicewomen.org/swan-updates/congress-wrestles-over-the-question-of-the-draft-for-women/>

⁴ See DACOWITS, 2015 Recommendations & Continuing Concerns, <http://dacowits.defense.gov/Portals/48/Documents/Reports/2015/FINAL%202015%20DACOWITS%20Recommendations%20and%20Continuing%20Concerns.pdf>. Specifically, Recommendation 3 states: Secretary of Defense should recommend legislation that mandates women between the ages of 18 and 26 fulfill the same selective service registration requirements as men.

Joe Heck asks how MG Laich would handle the question of conscientious objectors (CO).

MG Laich outlined that COs have a role to play including serving as cooks, chaplain's assistants, logisticians, and medics. He noted that the nation needs to be circumspect about how we identify this population, but acknowledged that there are legitimate objectors.

Joe Heck continues, would you continue alternative service programs for those who feel they cannot be part of an organization that could potentially go to war?

MG Laich responded that the first "tranche" of COs should be sent to the non-combat arms, noting that COs can, and have, served in a variety of positions historically. MG Laich raised the example of [Desmond Doss](#), a Seventh-Day Adventist who served with distinction as a U.S. Army medic during the battle of Okinawa. He continued that the image of what the military is has grown distorted by popular media and entertainment industry portrayals of combat, saying that if anything, it may be easier to place COs in today's military than the one prior to 1973.

Avril Haines raised that the Commission's mandate includes increasing the propensity to serve, and asks whether conscription would undercut the desire to create an ethos of service throughout the rest of the population.

MG Laich replied that it is difficult to provide empirical testimony to that, but anecdotally recalls interactions with veterans who were drafted, and claimed that of the approximately 200 he has talked to who were draftees, none have regretted their conscription. He continued that he has had several dozen successful men offer that they wish they had served. When asked why they did not, they cite other priorities or a high lottery number.

Joe Heck asks if that interaction is different with Vietnam veterans.

MG Laich replied that Vietnam veterans are infinitely more likely to bring up the unfairness of the draft.

Tom Kilgannon asks about bonuses as an equalizer and the tradeoffs between having more of the upper quintile serve and lower quintiles losing the financial opportunity.

MG Laich argued that the opportunity for bonuses could continue as the preponderance of the military end strength would continue to consist of volunteers. He believes that viewing bonuses as a transfer payment to lift people out of poverty is a high price for us to pay as a society. He noted that Congress now has the smaller percentage of military veterans than at any point in our history. He added that a draft would force Congress to assume their Article I Section 8 responsibilities to declare war, hypothesizing that parents would not tolerate the status quo, which he sees as Congress abdicating its responsibilities.

Jeanette James asks if, under a volunteer/conscript mix, the term of service would be the same for both? She also asks if the shift to a mix would erode the lethality of our armed forces.

MG Laich replied that the issue with lethality of the armed forces is not going to be primarily dictated by the method by which we recruit people. Lethality comes from weapon systems, the nature of the war being fought, and how effectively DoD manages the force. For example, the

active component currently has a major issue with obesity and physical readiness. He described the lethality issue as a “red herring,” recalling his own experiences with DoD’s attempts to enforce quality and standards within the active and reserve component.

Deb Wada says, given the civ-mil divide, and barring a catastrophic disaster that causes us to implement a draft, how would you propose that we begin this dialogue with an American public that has little interest in conscription?

MG Laich recommended predicating the issue on reforms that make the AVF fair, efficient, and sustainable as well as making a positive contribution to the civ-mil gap and foreign policy. He hopes this will help bring the conversation past the fear, apathy, ignorance, and guilt that serves as a barrier to addressing the issue and help people be more willing to look at alternatives.

Shawn Skelly asks if this is a population demand of leadership or something leadership will have to sell to the American people.

MG Laich posited that people need to be aware of the issues before being able to consider alternatives. In his opinion, this will get people past their fear, apathy, ignorance, and guilt.

Appendix A: Testimony from MG Dennis Laich Submitted to the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service

SUBJECT: Testimony to the National Commission on Military, National, and Public service

FROM: Major General Dennis Laich, US Army, Retired

TO: Commissioners

I would like to thank the Commission for the opportunity to contribute to its very important work through my testimony. I should stipulate that I support all forms of public service. However, I am deeply concerned by the current method of manning our military, the All-Volunteer Force, and wish to outline those concerns which are articulated in greater detail in my book, “Skin in the Game....Poor Kids and Patriots”.

The current method of manning our military, solely with volunteers, is unfair, inefficient, and unsustainable. Furthermore, it is a major cause of the civil-military gap and has led to the militarization of US foreign policy. This is an issue that impacts not only national security but also the social fabric of our democracy.

Unfair- The All=Volunteer Force (AVF) is unfair because it is structured to draw disproportionately from the third and fourth socio-economic quintiles of our population. The fifth quintile is often not qualified for enlistment due to high school dropout or criminal record. The first (and to a lesser extent the second) quintile has received a blanket exemption as they pursue more attractive alternatives. Enlistment bonuses (currently up to \$40,000) are disproportionately attractive to lower socio-economic classes. Is it a volunteer force if we have to pay large numbers of citizens to “volunteer”? Throughout our history the lower socio-economic classes of our nation have borne the burden of the risks and sacrifices of military service. The AVF normalizes this inequality of sacrifice and mocks fairness.

Inefficient- The AVF is inefficient because it is unable to expand quickly or efficiently to meet changing requirements in the nation’s defense. As a result, at the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (2005-2008) the Pentagon had to change deployment policies from two years recovery for each year in combat to a one-to-one ratio, overextend the reserve components, and pay unprecedented enlistment and reenlistment bonuses to man the force. These measures, among others, had devastating consequences for thousands of military families, created huge financial obligations for the VA, and adversely impacted the trust in and credibility of decision makers. Yet no policy maker and few elected officials had the courage to recommend conscription.

The AVF's inefficiency is also apparent in the military's competition with civilian employers and higher education for high quality talent. Approximately four million Americans turn eighteen each year and only 3 of 10 are ABLE to meet the minimum qualifications for enlistment: so approximately 1.2 million are ABLE to serve. However, only 15% of this group have a propensity or are WILLING to serve. This yields a pool of 180,000 who are ABLE and WILLING to serve. This leaves 1,020,000 who are ABLE but UNWILLING to serve. If we chose as a nation to expand the pool of recruits to the full 1.2 million rather than 180,000, we could raise the enlistment standards and dramatically increase the number of high quality recruits serving in our military. We could also reduce the expense and moral hazard of enlistment bonuses. The Pentagon has surrendered its most effective source of competitive advantage in enlisting high quality talent to our nation's defense.....conscription.

Unsustainable- In 1969 the Gates Commission, charged by President Nixon to "develop a comprehensive plan for eliminating conscription and moving toward an all-volunteer force" reached a unanimous agreement that the nation should move to an all-volunteer force. The commission's final report noted a number of "objections" to its recommendation. One of the principal "objections" was that the AVF would be very expensive-----so expensive that the nation could not afford it. The commission discounted this "objection" by emphasizing economic costs of manning the force rather than budget costs.

Fast forward four decades: Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta stated in 2012 that "the escalating growth in personnel costs must be confronted. This is an area of the budget that has grown by nearly 90 percent since 2001." In a July 2012 report, the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment stated that "Over the past decade the cost per person in the active duty force increased by forty six percent. If personnel costs continue to grow at that rate and the overall defense budget remains flat with inflation, military personnel costs will consume the entire defense budget by 2039." Personnel costs compete for scarce resources with readiness, procurement, R&D, and modernization within the defense budget. And the defense budget competes with domestic programs and rising interest costs for a nation that is already \$20 trillion in debt. To sustain the AVF the US will likely have to choose among raising taxes, borrowing more, reducing the size of the military force, or significantly reducing pay and benefits and risk reducing enlistments and reenlistments.

Civil-Military Gap- Three hundred and thirty million Americans lay claim to rights, liberties, and security that the AVF has exempted every one of them from any obligation to protect and defend. The task is left primarily to a small minority of poor kids and patriots to accomplish while those who have other priorities and a richer set of options exhibit their limited liability patriotism with "Support the Troops" bumper stickers and attendance at Veterans Day parades. The AVF makes national defense a spectator sport for the majority of Americans. The possibility of conscription into military service draws the attention of all socio-economic classes of young citizens and their parents to the military and national security policies that most now view through a lens of fear, apathy, ignorance, and guilt.

Militarization- The subjective argument that the AVF leads to the militarization of US foreign policy is that there is less social and political risk in deploying a military force of "volunteers"

into harm's way repeatedly or for an extended period, since, after all, they are "volunteers". The fact that most "volunteers" come from the third and fourth socio-economic quintiles reinforces this argument. The objective argument is that from 1946 to 1973 when the US maintained a conscripted force there were nineteen overseas military deployments in that 27 year period. From 1973 to 2012, the AVF period, more than 144 such deployments occurred. The AVF period deployment rate was five times higher per annum than the pre AVF period rate. The Gates Commission warned of such military adventurism.

The failure of the AVF should be of concern to all Americans. Relying on elected officials and military appointees with vested interests in the AVF to address the issues presented here is unrealistic. I am hopeful that the work of this Commission will be the gateway for a national dialogue on this issue which impacts not only national defense but also the moral fabric of our democracy.

Respectfully submitted,

Major General Dennis Laich,

US Army, Retired