

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,

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