



# GENERATIONS OF WAR

The Rise of the Warrior Caste & the All-Volunteer Force

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## About the Author



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## About the MVS Program

The Military, Veterans, and Society (MVS) program addresses issues facing America's service members, veterans, and military families, including the future of the All-Volunteer Force, trends within the veteran community, civil-military relations, and rebuilding the bipartisan defense consensus. The program produces high-impact research that informs and inspires strategic action; convenes stakeholders and hosts top-quality public and private events to shape the national conversation; and engages policymakers, industry leaders, Congress, scholars, the media, and the public about issues facing veterans and the military community.

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## Preface

*by Dr. Janine A. Davidson*

**T**hough the American experiment of an all-volunteer military force is largely considered to be a success, maintaining long-term awareness of challenges facing recruitment and retention will prove instrumental to sustaining the force for years to come. One such element is the “warrior caste” – the propensity of youth from military families to serve in the armed forces – a concept gaining renewed attention as the wars of the past 15 years wind down and the composition and readiness of the military take priority.

While the “warrior caste” offers unique benefits and certainly speaks well of the military community and ethos of service fostered therein, it also raises questions about future recruitment prospects, who bears the burden of a nation at war, and how this trend may affect use-of-force decisions. Schafer rightly observes that this trend may portend future problems for both recruiting and civil-military relations. She provides a key examination of the available data and a critical foundation for further research and discussion.

The importance of robust civil-military relations will only increase as the nation faces an increasingly tumultuous domestic and international environment. Ensuring the proper tools and dynamics are in place for the future must start with careful consideration of the varied factors contributing to fractures in civil-military relations today. “Generations of War” adds cogent analysis and insight to this discussion and raises questions about how an emerging “military caste” might affect the nation’s relationship with its military.

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## Introduction

There is a widening gulf in the United States today between the public and those who serve in the military and fight the nation's wars. Though the populace expresses a great deal of trust in the military,<sup>1</sup> the number of citizens with a direct connection to the military is shrinking, suggesting that respect for the military is inversely proportional to participation in it. There are several critical factors contributing to this separation, one of which is the growth of the “warrior caste” – a trend in which a large proportion of those who do choose to serve come from military families. This dynamic is worthy of careful attention; with less than 1 percent of Americans serving in the armed forces today, there are both risks and benefits to a subset of the U.S. population bearing the burdens of war.

The familial service phenomenon offers an opportunity to explore broader questions of the role of an all-volunteer force in a democracy. Who serves when not all serve? What is society's obligation to the armed forces? With a force that is unlikely to grow larger than 1 percent of the population,<sup>2</sup> how might the nation share the weight of war? Most importantly, if a “warrior caste” has led to an imbalance in sacrifice or contributed to the isolation of the military, how does the nation ameliorate these effects without jeopardizing the efficacy of the force or compromising the relationship between democracy and the armed forces?

Damage to civil-military relations is often contemplated in the chambers of power and academia, but can be just as pernicious at the societal level, particularly if service members, veterans, and their families feel isolated and misunderstood by the nation they have chosen to serve.<sup>3</sup> The introduction of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) created this modern-day “warrior caste” in which the military is increasingly composed of those who have an immediate family member who has served. Given the small proportion of the citizenry serving in uniform, there are risks in military service being relegated to the warrior caste alone. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates warned in 2010, “For a growing number of Americans, service in the military, no matter how laudable, has become something for other people to do.”<sup>4</sup>

Though no causal link has been identified between this growing phenomenon and the ability of the armed forces to recruit, it is not difficult to project a future in which very few outside of military families are exposed to military service. This separation poses challenges to the efficacy of the All-Volunteer Force and to our democracy. Over the past several decades, familial military service has become one of the strongest predictors of future service, and this trend is likely to become more concentrated as fewer Americans opt or are eligible to join the military.<sup>5</sup>

There is a risk that this schism will play a role in use of force decisions. Both popular opinion and policymakers themselves have been shaped by a culture divorced from the military – and the consequences of military engagement. Many lawmakers do not represent any significant military constituency. Furthermore, public polling reveals that most voting decisions do not prioritize foreign policy, an attitude reflective of the luxury of an all-volunteer military. While today's youth show a distinct willingness to support the use of force, they lack a commensurate willingness to serve in the military.<sup>6</sup> Should the effects of the warrior caste continue, there is cause for concern in the ability to sustain the trust necessary for productive and healthy civil-military relations.<sup>7</sup>

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This paper begins by describing the history of the All-Volunteer Force and the demographics of the military today. Next, it provides the currently available data on the warrior caste. Finally, it highlights the importance of understanding this phenomenon in the context of both recruitment and use-of-force decisions. The purpose of the AVF is to provide the nation with the strongest military while balancing cost and equity considerations.<sup>8</sup> Any changes to this system must prioritize the efficacy of the force. Current recruiting practices and societal dynamics have created a trend of family service, which offers both risks and opportunities for the success of the AVF.

## Background

The U.S. military has not always relied on volunteers. During World Wars I and II and the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam, the United States used conscription via selective service registration. Then, as now, male citizens aged 18–25, as well as certain immigrants, are legally required to register for selective service. Failure to register is considered a felony punishable by up to five years in prison and up to \$250,000, highlighting the seriousness of the obligation to serve if called.<sup>9</sup>

The United States shifted from fielding a force supplemented by conscription to an all-volunteer force in 1973, toward the end of the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War highlighted fissures in the system of conscription, as the American public vocalized fierce opposition to the draft. As the population grew and the government issued more waivers exempting men from service, conscription became increasingly imbalanced, with a much smaller proportion of eligible males drafted.<sup>10</sup> Substantiated allegations of corruption and bribery further undermined the equity of the draft. Finally, discipline issues with draftees and the belief that the population could yield a sizable force based solely on volunteers created the appetite for an all-volunteer force among policymakers.<sup>11</sup>

The decision to migrate from a conscription force to the AVF was not taken lightly or without detractors within the Department of Defense (DoD). The change followed a recommendation by the President's Commission on an All-Volunteer Force, known colloquially as the "Gates

consider that this governance rested on the foundation of a society largely familiar with the military due to the system of conscription and the enlisted corps. When the public writ large lacks personal connections to all elements of the armed forces, particularly the enlisted corps, this separation fosters a sense of "otherness." Regardless of leadership, isolation contributes to the development of a separate military ethos, governed by a sense that few Americans understand the military lifestyle.<sup>14</sup>

The commission tried to assuage concerns by noting the use of force is so important a decision, declining public engagement was unthinkable. It justified this view based on considerations such as "the high cost of military resources, the moral burden of risking human lives, political costs at home and overseas, and the overshadowing risk of nuclear confrontation."<sup>15</sup> However, this line of argument reflects a very different global world order than the one facing the commander in chief and Congress today. The last two authorizations for the use of military force (AUMFs) passed by Congress – which is Constitutionally responsible for the declaration of war – were passed by Congress and issued in 2001 and 2002 at the request of President George W. Bush. Ongoing military operations and advances in asymmetric warfare, accompanied by the rise of the use of special operations forces, have led to an increased militarization of U.S. foreign policy, yet without a corresponding AUMF.<sup>16</sup> Both concerns addressed by the Gates Commission appear to have been at least partially borne out over the course of the existence of the AVF, and are exacerbated by the rise in military service as a family affair.

## The military is among the most trusted institutions by the public, while at the same time one of the least familiar.

Commission."<sup>12</sup> When making its recommendation to President Richard Nixon, it addressed multiple objections to the transition, several of which prove prescient for this study. Concerns over the connection between the armed forces and society, as well as the composition of the armed forces, became much more prominent with the adoption of the AVF and the end of conscription.

Two prominent concerns were that an all-volunteer force could lead to a separate military ethos that is counter to democratic norms and institutions, as well posing problems for civilian investment in the proper use of military force.<sup>13</sup> The commission advanced the view, however, that the leadership of the officer corps, which even in a mixed force of professional soldiers and draftees always had been governed by professional service members, would always dictate the ethos of the military. Yet this confidence in the role of the officer corps fails to

Although U.S. citizens hold the military in ever-increasing regard,<sup>17</sup> it does not seem to correlate with concern or engagement with the use of military force. Popular support has waxed and waned over the course of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,<sup>18</sup> but even when a slim majority of citizens believed troops should be brought home, this has not translated into political pressure the way it did in times when a broader cross-section of America served, such as during the Vietnam War. Surveys demonstrate that the military is among the most trusted institutions by the public, while at the same time one of the least familiar.<sup>19</sup> Veterans of today's volunteer force report substantial alienation from the civilian population they serve.<sup>20</sup> Though there is little data to suggest that connection to the military is correlated with objections to the use of military force, the dissociation of the public from the military makes this worthy of further exploration and study.

## Challenges

Maintaining talent in the armed forces is a greater challenge than simply hitting recruiting targets; it requires strategic planning across different roles, anticipating future needs, and accessing the highest quality of talent possible.<sup>21</sup> The movement away from conscription inherently relied on young men and women volunteering to serve, with a premium placed on the quality of those accessions. When considering recruitment, the key element is not simply meeting numerical targets, but also considering if the current model recruits and retains the ideal mix of people, and if not, how to optimize or improve on these practices. Primary concerns surrounding recruiting this ideal cross-section include propensity for service across socioeconomic levels and geographic areas and the alignment of entry standards with outcomes. The domestic economy also plays a consequential role in the availability of recruits, with difficult economies yielding higher numbers of accessions, as well as easing retention by making continued military service more economically attractive.

Additionally, recruitment must not only account for the needs of today's military; given the current closed personnel management system, today's recruitment must meet the needs of the military over the coming decades. Since the current "up or out"<sup>22</sup> promotion system does not allow for lateral entry, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the service chiefs of 10, 20, or 30 years in the future are already in uniform. Therefore, the recruiting process of today must supply the best possible slate of service members for the future. Though DOD and the services are currently reexamining the options to augment the closed system outside of the combat arms specialties with lateral entry, particularly in areas such as cyber, it would require a significant cultural change and cannot reasonably be considered when making future force structure assumptions.

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Moreover, the geographic representation of the AVF is skewed toward the South, particularly when examining enlisted recruits. While this region always has historically contributed the most recruits to the armed forces, the disparity in the numbers of recruits coming from the South has increased over time, climbing from a low of 32 percent in FY76 to almost 45 percent of all recruits in FY15.<sup>23</sup> Nearly half of all new military recruits are consistently coming from one geographic region. Lest this be interpreted as simply reflective of variance in population, the South contributes the most recruits on a per capita basis as well, averaging 1.2 accession-share to civilian population ratio, indicating that a larger concentration of recruits come from the South than should be expected given the number of 18- to 24-year-old civilians in the region. No other geographic area meets the expected number of accessions as a percentage of its population, while the South consistently exceeds its own. At the same time, the percentages of recruits from the Midwest and Northeast have decreased over time, with the Northeast contributing less than only 18.1 percent of all enlisted recruits in FY15.

These trends may be reflective of several possible phenomena, including a family history of service, the influence of exposure to military service via geographic proximity on propensity to serve, and the social tradition of military service in various regions. From a fiscal perspective, consolidating bases and putting installations in places where lots of inexpensive land is available is a pragmatic decision for the DoD; however, it may be having a disproportionate effect on recruiting. Though less data is available, this split is not believed to reflect the composition of the officer corps, which is more likely than the enlisted corps to come from the Northeast, and is much less racially diverse. There also are a number of prestigious military commissioning opportunities for officers historically located on the East Coast, such as West Point and the Naval Academy, as well as the Citadel, Virginia Military Institute, and Norwich Academy.

## Warrior Caste

The data surrounding recruits with a familial connection to the military comes from a variety of sources, and therefore is somewhat fragmented. It paints a picture of a force in which many of those who choose to serve have a familial connection to military service. Other factors, however, play a significant role in influencing the propensity to serve, such as geographic exposure to service through proximity to a major military base or reserve center.<sup>24</sup> The primary sources of data on the warrior caste phenomenon consist of surveys distributed and collected by the Department of Defense to assess population attitudes toward military service, and surveys administered to new enlisted recruits. Both surveys are generated and collected by the Joint Advertising Market Research & Studies (JAMRS) program.<sup>25</sup>

Additional data sources include research conducted by independent researchers, such as those conducted by Pew Research Center and YouGov's recent survey commissioned by the Hoover Institution. In examining those sources a clear trend emerges, showing a significant number of military recruits coming from families with a history of military service. However, due to sample size, varied phrasing of questions, and the relatively small amount of survey work done on the officer corps, there are limitations to testing the current hypotheses surrounding the warrior caste phenomenon.

This report places an emphasis on research that articulates a parental relationship versus family ties more broadly to mitigate the effect of draft-era military service on family members, particularly grandparents. This also isolates particular effects that may occur within a household experiencing active or reserve service, including but not limited to the experiences of deployment, living overseas, and depending on the array of military health and compensation benefits. Ideally, this will create a baseline for further research and data collection to monitor this emerging trend in the recruiting pool.

It has been suggested that the decision to pursue the "family business" is not isolated to military service – the same links are found among lawyers, doctors, farmers, and across many industries. Termed "professional inheritance," the phenomenon demonstrates how children are more likely to go into the field of a parent or family member that they have been exposed to.<sup>26</sup> However prevalent a trend this is in other fields, there are added implications and concerns when it occurs within the profession solely responsible for the use of force on behalf of a democratic nation. Though not necessarily a surprising or unusual tendency, promulgating a separate

group of citizens who are both responsible for and bear the burdens of military service carries additional implications in a democracy.

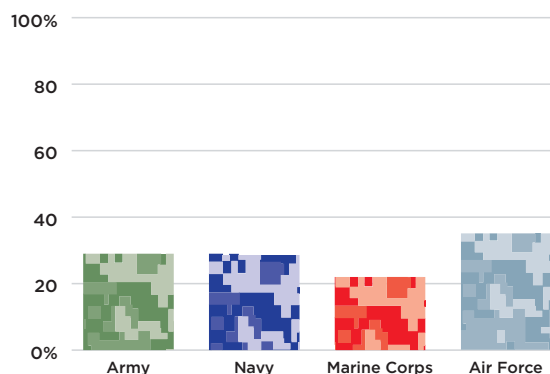
DoD JAMRS data from 2015 (the most recent data available) indicates that more than 25 percent of new enlisted recruits have a parent who has served in the military.<sup>27</sup> When the aperture is widened to include a connection to broader family members, such as an aunt/uncle, cousin, sibling, or grandparent, over 75 percent of new recruits for each service have a family member who has served – though this increase is likely attributable to ties to the large conscription-era forces of Korea and Vietnam.<sup>28</sup> This is statistically significant given the overall representation of veterans within the U.S. population. Currently, they only comprise approximately 7 percent of the adult U.S. population, and their proportion is shrinking as the World War II, Korea, Cold War and Vietnam-era cohorts fade away. These survey results coupled with the overall population percentage of veterans suggest that recruits with a direct military family connection are significantly overrepresented in today's U.S. military. Blue Star Family's annual survey reaffirms this, noting in 2016 that 45 percent of active-duty, 47 percent of military spouses, and 57 percent of veteran respondents have a parent who served.<sup>29</sup> Even more strikingly, 53 percent of their survey respondents had two or more immediate family members who served in the military.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the military family connection may be more significant than any other variable in determining propensity to serve.

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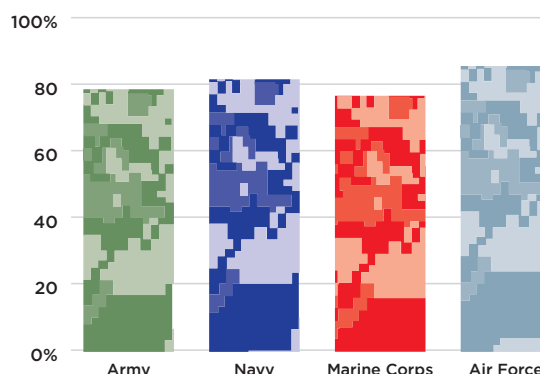
The literature suggests that parental influence is one of the "strongest influences on youth career decisions."<sup>31</sup> The JAMRS survey provides some insight to the impact of parental influence. Fifteen percent of top recruits report that their mother positively influenced their decision to join "a lot" or "a great deal," while 22 percent report that fathers likewise positively influenced the decision to join. Interestingly, the data also shows that for the least competitive recruits, this number grows to almost 35 percent. This may reflect an attitude among military children that service is the logical career path. For such children, the abnormal decision to "opt out" of military service is akin to the radical choice of the general population to "opt in." However, this relies on



FIGURE 1  
Percentage of Recruits with a Military Parent<sup>89</sup>



Percentage of Recruits with a Military Family Member



self-reported survey data, and may not reflect any subconscious influence a parent may or may not have on the enlistment decision. The JAMRS data further highlights that recruits whose influencer had prior military experience are “more likely to rate that person as having influence on their decision to join.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, this indicates that a parent with military experience who recommends military service (and the frequency with which the recommendation is communicated) is positively related to youth intention to enlist.<sup>33</sup> Yet recent survey results indicate that 57 percent of active-duty military parents would *not* recommend military service to their children, challenging the efficacy of the all-volunteer system of recruitment.<sup>34</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s, when contact with veterans was more widespread due to the larger U.S. veteran population at the time (in absolute and relative terms), children of a career military parent were two to six times more likely to serve, while 52 percent of Navy recruits in 1996–97 had a veteran parent.<sup>35</sup> The same study found the rate at which children of career military fathers volunteer for military service is eight to ten times higher than non-military children.<sup>36</sup> Of note, this dynamic appears in data prior to September 11, 2001, after which an uptick in the number of military-affiliated recruits has been observed.<sup>37</sup>

Facebook researchers recently conducted analysis on familial trends in career paths based on profiles on the social networking site. Based on users’ reported professions on Facebook, “a son who has a father in the military is 5 times more likely to enter the military, but just 1 in 4 sons of a military professional does so.”<sup>38</sup> While there is an increased probability of a child entering his or her parent’s career field, the absolute percentage in which this occurs for the military is still only 25 percent. The same study also found a high rate of siblings choosing

the same profession, with sets of twins (both male and female) and non-twin male siblings having the strongest connection.<sup>39</sup> Of all of the reported professions on Facebook, the rate of professional inheritance was the highest in the military career field. This finding may indicate that propensity toward professional inheritance is even stronger in the military than in other professions.

Data provided by the Army specifically indicates that in 2015 83 percent of recruits had a family member who has served in the military.<sup>40</sup> Narrowing the definition to a parental connection, 36 percent had a father who had served and 6 percent had a mother who had.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, an Army survey conducted in 2007 noted that of the 304 general officers then currently serving, 180 had children serving as well.<sup>42</sup> This may indicate that, particularly at the level of military elites, there is

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an increased propensity to serve – perpetuating not only military service, but also military leadership within a small community. One independent survey examining the Army found that 21 percent of officers and 11 percent of soldiers report having a career-military parent, with an additional 39 percent noting they had a parent in the military, but for whom the military was not a career.<sup>43</sup> The data is further broken down by race to show that 65 percent of white officers had a father who served in the military, demonstrating in particular how the warrior caste perpetuates homogeneity.<sup>44</sup> The majority of those who advance to senior leadership in the armed forces

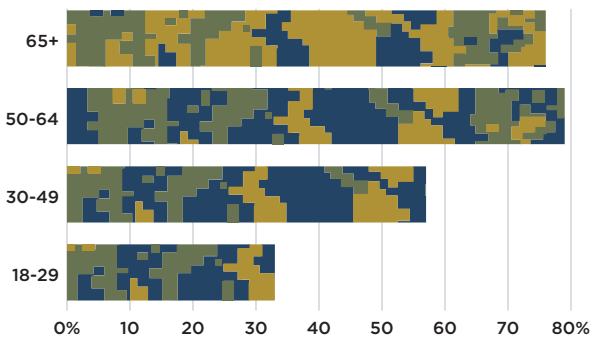
are white male officers, and Army data indicates that well over 50 percent of them have a parent who served, highlighting both the concentration of the warrior caste phenomenon as well as its effect on the lack of racial diversity in military leadership.

This trend among service members is borne out by survey data about public familiarity with the armed forces. In 1991, 63 percent of Americans reported having an immediate family member in the military. Twenty years later, a 2011 Pew Survey<sup>45</sup> found that a comparable 61 percent of Americans have an immediate family member who has served.<sup>46</sup> While at first glance these similar findings may indicate familial participation has remained constant, further analysis broken down by age indicates a more evident isolation of the armed forces from one generation to the next. It appears that as the nation becomes further removed from the conscription-era forces, Americans have fewer ties to the military, with increasing insularity among military communities and families who have become the primary constituency for service.<sup>47</sup> When the question is narrowed to respondents under 40, those with familial connections drops precipitously to 40 percent, and for those under 30 it is a mere 33 percent.<sup>48</sup> The decline in military service over time is marked, with 19 percent of YouGov survey respondents either serving themselves or having a family member who has served, a proportion that shrinks to only 15.6 percent when asking solely about post-9/11 service.<sup>49</sup> This is particularly remarkable given the national veteran population has hovered at approximately 15 percent of adults,<sup>50</sup> lending credence to the theory that the service-member population is becoming increasingly insular.

There is an inflection point in the post-9/11 accessions data at which those with a family history of military service increased among recruits.<sup>52</sup> 9/11 marked a shift away from a largely peacetime force. Although this shift is difficult to measure, it may indicate that the motivation for members of the military community to enlist is more service-related and potential recruits are less likely to be deterred by the possibility of deployment. This aligns with JAMRS data: When broken down by quality, the most competitive or “Category I” recruits are the least likely to cite any of the benefits as influential on their recruiting decision. The relatively lower value of benefits on high quality recruits suggests that an intrinsic motivation to serve may underlie the best candidates’ decision to enlist.

Though it appears clear that those with immediate family members or parents who serve in the military are themselves more likely to serve, it is difficult to ascertain the various factors that contribute to such a phenomenon. While a family history of service may contribute to this propensity, some argue that it is more related to exposure and the cultures that support military service than family lineage. Cultural exposure then becomes an issue of the location of military bases and influencers, as well as a lack of social interactions between civilians and the military. Those who grow up near large military bases will be exposed to military personnel and the military lifestyle at a much higher rate; however, bases are not generally near population centers, making this impact relatively limited.<sup>53</sup> More than half of those who join the military are termed “core joiners” – indicating in surveys that they have “always” planned to join the military or have been considering it for at least the five years prior to joining – highlighting the importance of military influence in youth in driving enlistment.<sup>54</sup> Among policymakers, there seems to be widespread agreement that these “generations of war” or family legacies of service exist, with service representatives noting it raises concerns about the efficacy of the future recruiting pool, as the services get smaller and fewer serve, then it follows the recruiting pool also will shrink considerably.<sup>55</sup>

FIGURE 2  
Percentage of the Public with Immediate Family Ties to the Military<sup>51</sup>



## Implications

Familial propensity to serve and its impact on recruiting warrant further study, as there are likely both positive and negative effects associated with this trend. How does the “familiarity gap” between the armed forces and society writ large apply to democratic norms? What role does the warrior caste play in narrowing the recruiting pool and diversity of background and experience of the force? Does the warrior caste trend contribute to a separate ethos or sense of superiority among the armed forces? Possible benefits include the steady stream of recruits the warrior caste provides, the advanced knowledge and preparation these recruits bring to their military careers, and the sense of service and community that may contribute to the decision to join the military after growing up in that environment. Further, the rate at which children of service members join the military is an indicator of quality of life and esprit de corps.

### Familiarity Gap

From the Founding Fathers’ enshrining of the role of state militias instead of a standing Army, to the current policy debates over the role of Guard and Reserve components, the “citizen soldier” ideal has been an important part of the American ethos. Indeed, this concept is enshrined in our Constitution’s text through the prohibition on standing armies.<sup>56</sup> Yet the standing military that has existed since World War II, manned since the Vietnam War through recruitment and retention using market means, has contributed to a growing sense of “otherness” impacting civil-military relations. This divide has grown deeper and wider as the military has shrunk since the first Gulf War, while American society has grown. In the early 1990s, concerns mounted over the military’s isolation from society due to the post-Cold War drawdown and the subsequent decline in personal connections or familiarity with the military.<sup>57</sup> The last 15 years of war have further exacerbated these dynamics, particularly as there has been no significant increase in the size of the military.

Senior officers have connected the familiarity gap to familial ties with some calling service a “family business,” which, if left unabated, has the potential to lead to a military completely cut off from society.<sup>58</sup> The propagation of military service within families not only skews the demographics of the recruiting pool, but also contributes substantially to feelings of isolation and excessive burdens falling upon the few.<sup>59</sup> The highest ranks of the military are saturated with families who have served for generations and have legacies of multi-generational

flag officers. Burdening the same families repeatedly belies an issue of equity and sense of “otherness” in the concentration of military service within an already small community.

At the societal level, the increasing gap between citizens and those who fight their wars may translate to broad-based support and respect for the military among the public, but less knowledge and familiarity than ever before. Survey data from both the Pew Research Center and the Hoover Institution’s YouGov polls indicates an alarming level of ignorance about the role and engagement of the military, particularly alongside the high levels of trust granted by the public. Unprecedented support coupled with lack of familiarity creates a situation in which force can be used increasingly liberally without public oversight. The small military force that has become increasingly adept at surgical and precision uses of force eschews the oversight that comes from larger militaries and larger military operations. There is very little publicity or recognition as to the intensity of the operational tempo that was used to sustain the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, let alone the particular burdens

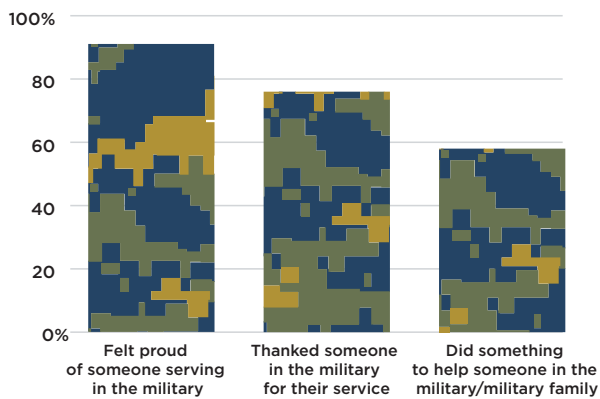
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placed on communities such as special operations. That only .4 percent of Americans serve in the active-duty force at any time makes diversity of service even more critical for proper oversight, rather than taxing and isolating the same families time and again. War has continued in the background for over 15 years, yet it is largely absent from the consciousness of most Americans.<sup>60</sup>

One of the primary consequences of the transition to an AVF is the dissociation of the American public from military personnel and the missions they are expected to undertake on behalf of their country. There is a sense that the public has outsourced responsibility to the military and assuaged that guilt by assigning heroism to military service. The “thank you for your service” culture, while arguably better than the resentment and anger many veterans faced in the Vietnam era, also carries with it the notion of a disengaged public for whom the wars

and those who fight them are largely an abstraction. Both fictional accounts<sup>61</sup> and surveys of service members and their families<sup>62</sup> indicate a frustration among service members with the lack of understanding among the public and the portrayal of veterans as broken. Thus, the inability to see veterans as individual people may be doing a greater disservice than appears on the surface, as assumptions about service members and veterans are perpetuated with few interactions to counteract their effects. The narratives surrounding military service in popular culture are overwhelmingly that of either the war hero or the tragic victim.<sup>63</sup> For all the high levels of trust confirmed by the public, less than 60 percent actually have done something to help a service member (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3  
Public Engagement with Service Members<sup>64</sup>



For those under 30, there has been a sharp decline in familiarity with the military as measured by knowing someone in uniform. The consequences of the familiarity gap are captured in part by polls reporting high levels of trust in the military among the public, which contributes to eroding views on the extent to which civilians control the military. Additionally, YouGov polls found a striking number of respondents answer “don’t know” (or abstain from answering altogether) on more specific questions about the military. Unfortunately, the most exposure society seems to get to the military and veterans lies at both ends of the spectrum and relies on contrived public displays of patriotism, such as at sporting events, Hollywood portrayals of snipers, or the publicity surrounding wounded, ill, and injured veterans. Such extremes paint a disproportionate picture of veterans and service members as frontline heroes or broken, lacking the nuance of the many roles available and wide spectrum of people who choose to serve their country. One pernicious side effect of this distorted exposure

is that the public lacks the necessary familiarity, and perhaps desire, to engage on the most important use of force and military-related political questions.<sup>65</sup>

Furthermore, there is an expectation gap created when the military is placed on a pedestal. Unreasonable demands and expectations of military force lead to an easily disappointed public when aims cannot be achieved quickly.<sup>66</sup> The familial tradition of military service may contribute to this isolation, keeping the already low number of those who serve or are related to someone who served within certain families or communities, while much of the public remains unfamiliar with the missions, limitations, and strains on the military force today. Further emphasizing this dynamic is polling by the Harvard Institute of Politics, which found in the fall of 2015 that many youth supported sending ground troops back into Iraq to fight ISIS, yet very few would consider serving in the military themselves.<sup>67</sup>

For those within the military, this familiarity gap also may lead to a sense of isolation that can manifest as elitism. The sense of otherness paired with frequently higher levels of education and physical fitness can contribute to the idea that the military is not only separate, but a superior class. With increasing levels of ineligibility among the population due to obesity and other issues, there is an even higher risk of a sense of superiority among those who do qualify and choose to serve. Adding a layer of family service to these pre-existing conditions contributes to the sense that those who serve are of a higher moral and physical code. This type of belief among the military community poses significant challenges to productive civil-military relations at the societal level. There is some evidence that this manifests as a sense of entitlement among veterans that can be counterproductive when they eventually leave the service. It may come tied to unrealistic expectations when looking for civilian employment, based on the mismatch between their self-perception, public rhetoric,

**The ‘thank you for your service’ culture, while arguably better than the resentment and anger many veterans faced in the Vietnam era, also carries with it the notion of a disengaged public for whom the wars and those who fight them are largely an abstraction.**

and the market’s perception of their value.<sup>68</sup> Surveys suggesting the military feels misunderstood by the public highlight this risk.<sup>69</sup> The increased use of the armed forces as a selective tool of engagement, particularly within the special operations community, also increases the risk that a very small portion of families will bear the burdens of the use of force.

The warrior caste contributes to the familiarity gap between civilians and the military, posing a fundamental challenge to a functioning democracy by narrowing society’s representation within the force. The lack of exposure to members of the military or the ramifications of use-of-force decisions poses a challenge to democratic norms. Voters lack the requisite familiarity to hold policymakers accountable for foreign policy decisions, and lack investment in the well-being of the military community. Most of the nation votes for a commander-in-chief who is unfamiliar with those who will be affected by his or her decisions on military force. Most members of Congress, those without a major active base in their district or state, lack any significant military constituency. Thus, both at the policymaking and societal levels, there are relatively few consequences for the use or misuse of force, owing largely to the isolation of the AVF. When fewer Americans consider volunteering for military service and fewer representatives must consider the affect of their actions on those who do, the force becomes isolated from society and the use of force, a phenomenon that is fundamentally less democratic. Though the further involvement of Congress may fail to check poor impulses, such as those that led to Vietnam, each member had to contend with constituencies who were invested in the continued conflict, rather than having the luxury of not being pressed on issues of military engagement.

### Isolation & Propensity to Serve

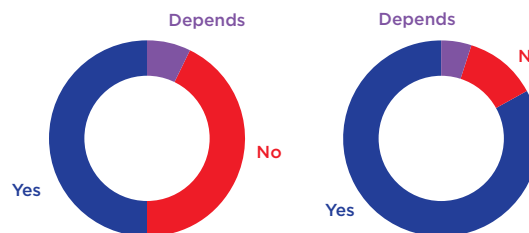
The standing military is unlikely to grow to a size where its reach is felt throughout the U.S. population. The veteran population, however, can bridge that gap. While the active-duty force continues to hover at approximately .4 percent of the population, the veteran population is almost 7 percent of the population. Veterans also are more likely to recommend military service than non-veterans.<sup>70</sup> A more diverse force is the best guarantor of a continued stream of recruits from all parts of American society, as veterans return home after service and continue to be influencers and role models. If interaction with veterans is one of the best ways to encourage future service, then it is unsurprising that military service is perpetuated within military families.

However, this means that as the phenomenon continues and the community becomes more insular the military may struggle to maintain a robust recruiting pipeline for the AVF. The continuation of military service through family lines likely is reinforcing today’s lack of geographic and socioeconomic diversity in the force – white males represent the largest share of the population from the South and West.

When examining the civil-military divide in recruiting the AVF, the role of exposure and influencers becomes a key factor in a young person’s decision to join the military. According to 2011 survey data from Pew Research Center, of the civilians surveyed only 48 percent would advise a young person to join the military, while 82 percent of veterans would do so (Figure 4). With an active force of approximately .5 percent of the U.S. population, this invariably leads to a downward trend in those being encouraged to join the military.

Public perception of the military has an even greater effect on an individual’s willingness to encourage their daughters to join, with almost 40 percent of those polled so concerned about sexual assault that they say “it is a sufficient reason by itself to dissuade a friend or daughter from joining the military at all.”<sup>71</sup> While sexual assault in the military is not a problem to be considered lightly, these statistics reveal the effect that limited exposure to the military can have on the general public’s impressions and willingness to encourage the young people, particularly young women, they influence to serve. Furthermore, youth surveys conducted by the Department of Defense find that “those recruits who indicate that an influencer has previously served in the Military are more likely to rate that person having an influence on their decision to join.”<sup>72</sup> This demonstrates the critical role contact with those who have served can play in future propensity to serve, a factor that is currently limited to a small segment of America.

FIGURE 4  
**Percentage of Civilians Who Would Advise a Young Person to Join the Military**      **Percentage of Post-9/11 Veterans Who Would Advise a Young Person to Join the Military<sup>73</sup>**



Given the significant role influencers play in a youth's propensity to serve in the armed forces, this not only poses challenges for increasing the diversity of the recruiting pool, but also contributes to the self-perpetuating nature of military service. Those with more veteran interaction and influential veterans in their life are likely to be positively influenced to enlist.<sup>74</sup> However, the current insularity of the force means that veterans move back to where they came from, or near military installations, or are distilled into large cities, with their greatest impact in the small towns where the military already successfully recruits.

**Weighing the Costs**

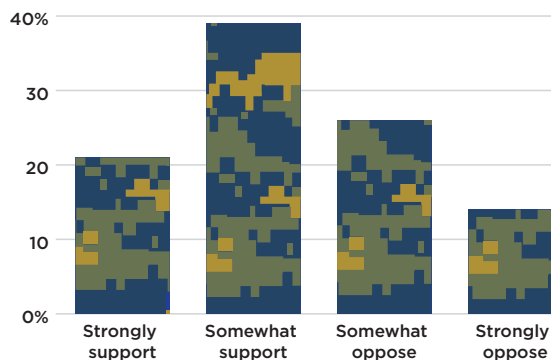
Monitoring the effects of the rise of the warrior caste may pale in comparison to other challenges facing the efficacy of the All-Volunteer Force. With concerns over the available quality and quantity of future personnel,<sup>75</sup> youth possessing both an increased propensity to serve and a tacit understanding of the challenges of military service may prove beneficial to cultivating a high-quality force. The military recruiting system is optimized to achieve certain numerical targets – not necessarily other goals such as diversity among the cohort of those who serve. However, the short-term benefits of hitting recruiting targets must be weighed against the long-term implications of isolating military service to a small and self-perpetuating segment of our population. The high level of isolation is particularly worrisome among youth today, who have the least personal connections to military service of any generation since World War II.

The cognitive dissonance between military service and the use of force in young Americans was highlighted by Harvard's Fall 2015 Institute of Politics poll, which was administered during the rise of ISIS. The poll surveyed youth ages 18–29 and asked whether they supported or opposed sending U.S. ground troops to combat ISIS. More than 50 percent somewhat or strongly supported such a mission (Figure 5). Yet if additional troops were needed, only 13 percent not already serving would definitely or strongly consider joining the military. When juxtaposed with the majority who would support the military mission, this highlights a striking disconnect between the use of force and military service.

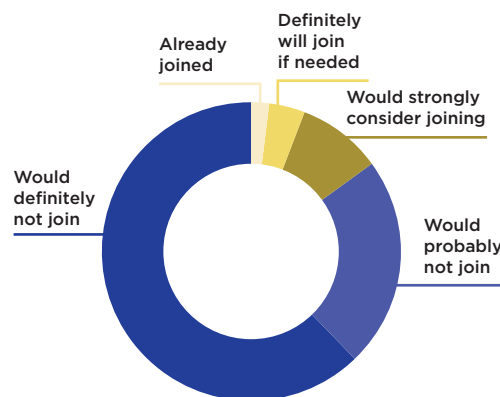
The lack of public literacy on foreign policy means there are few checks on the government when poor decisions are made because few people are qualified or informed enough to notice and object.<sup>76</sup> The continued

promulgation of military service among families furthers the isolation of the force and perpetuates dissociation – it becomes easier for the public to compartmentalize the use of force when it does not directly affect anyone they know. Though a logical supposition, there is currently no research that links connections to military service with changes in use of force or military engagement decisions, with other variables critical to perceptions of use of force, such as the legitimacy of the operation and likelihood of success.<sup>77</sup> Service among military families is not necessarily a bad thing, but it must be balanced with service from the larger population. Recruiting efforts should reflect that.

FIGURE 5  
Do you support or oppose the United States sending ground troops to participate in a military campaign against the Islamic State?<sup>90</sup>



If the United States needed additional troops to combat the Islamic State, how likely would you be to serve?



## Recognizing the Opportunities

The familial legacy offers opportunities for ensuring the long-term viability of the force, if paired with robust efforts to expand the recruiting footprint. Children of military personnel may be more likely to understand the challenges of the military lifestyle and be better prepared for the unique stresses and rewards that accompany military service. Knowing that military children are predisposed to service also allows for upstream intervention and cultivation of particular subject areas, such as introducing more STEM or strategy-related coursework into DoDEA schools. The application to accession ratio in recruiting also has declined to an extent that this consistent recruiting stream may prove critical to the long-term viability of the force. The second- and third-order effects raised by the warrior caste are that it reduces the interactions between those who have served and the community at large, as well as the desire to serve among non-military children. Taken together, this limits the diversity of recruits, posing a challenge to the efficacy of the AVF as well as raising the question of how democratic norms function in a society when the military is no longer representative of the public.

**The familial legacy offers opportunities for ensuring the long-term viability of the force, if paired with robust efforts to expand the recruiting footprint.**

## Recommendations

As the military moves further away from the conscription force, the impacts of the warrior caste phenomenon will continue to grow.

### Do Not Return to Conscription

Though a return to conscription is the oft-cited solution to the isolation of the All-Volunteer Force, this line of reasoning is misguided. The transition to the all-volunteer system has yielded a more professional and talented force. Conscription likely would weaken the military, contradicting the fundamental goal of any recruiting initiative, which must be to ensure the military remains the best fighting force in the world. The goal of further diversifying the force and incentivizing the public to feel a sense of investment in military outcomes is an admirable one; however, it is unlikely that conscription would succeed in achieving these goals. Instead, a return to the draft would render the force less competent and even promote inequality through exemptions. The small number of youth qualified for military service today also poses risks for any compulsory service endeavors, with physical fitness, educational requirements, and medical requirements disqualifying approximately 70 percent of youth between the ages of 17 to 25 – including women, who are currently not required to register for the draft.<sup>78</sup> Lastly, the political will required to institute a draft is incredibly unlikely. One clear indicator of aversion to the draft is the regularity with which by Representative Charles Rangel's legislation calling for a draft has been voted down, indicating Congress' unwillingness to move away from the AVF.<sup>79</sup> Most importantly, conscription does not contribute to the ultimate goal of any policy change: ensuring the U.S. armed forces remain the greatest in the world.

### Expand Exposure & The Recruiter Footprint

Diversity in all forms serves to benefit the armed forces, providing unique skills and perspectives to ensure our military remains the best fighting force in the world. The incentive structure for recruiting likely contributes to the concentration of recruits from similar backgrounds, and offers an opportunity to reprioritize long-term diversification of the force. Reticence to concentrate in areas that are historically unsuccessful is logical; the armed forces have finite recruiting resources and goals to meet. Thus, either those goals need to be relaxed or a minimally resource-intensive means of expanding the recruiter footprint needs to be found. The best way to ensure the long-term viability of the force and to break the mold

of the warrior caste is to target those who are not core joiners and who are currently largely unexposed to the opportunities of military service.

One option would be to partner with other service organizations – such as Americorps, Teach for America, and others – to target recruits already considering some form of serving to highlight the opportunities available in the military beyond simply the combat roles often publicized and glamorized by Hollywood and the media. Aligning with organizations in historically underserved areas such as the Northeast and Ivy League could prove especially fruitful. These offer options for low-cost dispersion to geographic and socioeconomic areas where military service may not have a storied history, or where many veterans may not return to serve as influencers and advocates.

**The best way to ensure the long-term viability of the force and to break the mold of the warrior caste is to target those who are not core joiners and who are currently largely unexposed to the opportunities of military service.**

It also is important to consider the role the Guard and Reserve can play in expanding this footprint, given their integration with communities across the United States. Using the Reserve component's infrastructure is a way to leverage existing resources – instead of diverting active-duty recruiting resources – to diversify recruiting efforts. The Reserve component offers geographical distribution as well as integration into civilian workforces, which can and should be opportunities to promote military service and to close the civil-military gap.

The military ought to invest in big data to further optimize recruiting through technology such as apps and websites, without necessarily needing a significant on-the-ground footprint.<sup>80</sup> The traditional recruiting model uses in-person high school visits and physical storefronts, yet the advent of modern technology allows for virtual recruiting sessions, online challenges, and partnerships with popular activities such as “mud runs” to normalize the military, reach a broader audience, and foster recruiting connections.

### **Increase Engagement**

Beyond recruiting a more diverse force, public education on foreign policy and military engagement may go a long way toward mitigating some of the civil-military divide questions raised by the warrior caste, addressing the effects of the phenomenon rather than the warrior caste itself. The current use of Overseas Contingency Operations as a DoD slush fund and lack of renewed AUMF speak to the lack of oversight and public engagement with the use of military force and its impact on the broader budget. Similarly, more robust civics education and exposure to the armed forces at a younger age may create a greater sense of buy-in and familiarity among those who do not serve or have direct ties to those who do.

It also is important to consider the role of military infrastructure in any isolation or gap, with the continued separation of military communities on fewer and fewer bases caused by various rounds of base realignment and closure (BRAC) and the concentration of resources on bases limiting the necessary interactions with civilians.<sup>81</sup> Since its implementation, there have been five rounds of BRAC, eliminating 121 military major bases from a starting point of 522.<sup>82</sup> While closing approximately 20 percent of major military bases undoubtedly has saved money and consolidated resources, one consequence is the further limitation of interaction between the military and the public. More outreach and socializing on the part of the military community also could serve to bridge some of the gap in society today. Though there is a fiscal incentive to close military bases with excess infrastructure, this is contributing to the limited exposure of society to the military.

### **Increase Available Data and Further Research this Phenomenon**

The rigors of war have strained the All-Volunteer Force, posing broader questions about its efficacy and the challenges it will face in the future. Part of this assessment will need to be careful evaluation of the role of a small standing force in a large democracy, and therefore where the boundaries of appropriate use of force lie. Additional study of the warrior caste phenomenon will be critical to monitoring civil-military relations at both the societal and policymaking level. More comprehensive surveys for all entering recruits and commissioning officers, surveys of military spouses, richer JAMRS data that is shared more publicly, and better demographic data capture all are critical elements of understanding and tracking both this phenomenon and other recruiting trends over time. Additional further data is needed, particularly looking at the propensity of the warrior caste among the officer corps and the flag/general officer cohorts, to examine the extent to which military leadership has become the purview of a smaller number of families and the effect on both recruiting and civil-military relations.



## Conclusion

Service members with a family history of service are valuable additions to the armed forces, but it must be as a subset of a more diverse force. Varied perspectives and innovative thought come from a diversity of backgrounds, in addition to other markers of diversity such as race, gender, geography, and socioeconomic status. Given that the military is currently made up of white males from the South and West, a growth in the warrior caste will perpetuate a homogeneous force to its own detriment. In addition to the concerns already raised, this particular slice of America is facing a number of issues that may preclude future military service, eroding the one consistent source of recruits.<sup>83</sup> The warrior caste is but one factor among many contributing to the homogenization of the armed forces, in particular the officer corps, and the narrowing of the already small pool of recruits. Thus, the broader concern may be if those with a family history are joining at the exclusion of others.<sup>84</sup> Diversity of background likely will prove to be the most effective bulwark against more concerning trends in civil-military relations.

There are immense risks associated with any attempts to change this phenomenon. The second- and third-order effects of reducing the number of accessions writ large in an era when the number of qualified youth is shrinking and propensity to serve is a continual challenge threaten the health of the recruiting pool. Similarly, those already familiar with the challenges and rigors of military service may be uniquely positioned to thrive as members of the armed forces, a net positive for the military. Yet children of military members also are potentially the most compelling ambassadors for the immense privileges of service. Their continuing the tradition due to pride in their nation and an appreciation for the importance of service and community could be an incredibly positive phenomenon.<sup>85</sup> A study of adolescents whose parents deployed found that the military lifestyle may be teaching military children resiliency,<sup>86</sup> as well as an appreciation for service and sacrifice, that both propels them toward serving their country in uniform and prepares them for the rigors of the military lifestyle. Simply because military children are well suited to military service, however, does not mean that this trend should not be very carefully monitored. It poses serious challenges to the notion of a military force that is representative of America and democratic underpinnings to the use of force. Furthermore, reliance on this population to meet recruiting thresholds, whether conscious or not, poses a serious risk to the force should the trend ever reverse itself.

There also is the risk that generational service leads to an attitude of elitism among the military. Beyond a service members' sense of "otherness" in relation to society, an attitude of superiority may emerge. Erosion in civil-military relations may occur from the military side, and a sense of superiority derived from this feeling of otherness could pose a genuine challenge to the principles of civilian control.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, a more pronounced sense of grievance would pose significant concerns for the role of the military and broader norms of civilian control.<sup>88</sup>

The warrior caste provides a lens through which to view the growing isolation of the All-Volunteer Force and the direct ramifications on a critical element of sustaining the finest fighting force in the world—recruiting. Though it always is tempting to focus on the urgent instead of the important, over the long term these dynamics will provide either an opportunity for investment in sustainable expansion of the recruitment pool or the eventual narrowing of the force – making it altogether separate from the nation it defends. The already tenuous sinews connecting the military and society today increase the risk of use-of-force decisions going unnoticed and without scrutiny, all but severing the role of a democratic nation in wartime.

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