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STORM CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON

Challenges and Recommendations for Military Recruiting and Retention

Christopher J. McMahon and Colin J. Bernard

The current administration has placed great emphasis on “rebuilding the military.” The proposed buildup, which includes initiatives such as increasing the number of USN ships from the present number of 272 to 355, will require more soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen. Because of today’s insufficient state of recruiting and retention in the military, the Pentagon is presented with a considerable challenge to increase the size of its forces. For the Department of Defense (DoD) to meet the human resource requirements and attract and retain appropriate numbers of personnel, the Pentagon needs to consider making significant and

likely controversial changes to its policies on career flexibility, permanent change of station (PCS) moves, and required recruiting standards. A failure to modify these policies will lead mathematically to serious personnel issues owing to the dearth of young people who are willing to join the military, meet the present requirements and qualifications, and plan to remain in the military for a long-term career.

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THE PROBLEM

The fiscal year 2018 National Defense Authorization Act (FY18 NDAA) that President Donald J. Trump signed authorized nearly seven hundred billion dollars for DoD.¹ The FY18 NDAA is predicated on increasing the size of the military

by 25,900 people by October 2019 and by a total of 56,600 by 2023.² The majority of the increase would consist of active-duty personnel. The numbers were calculated specifically to achieve the intent of the *2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS)*, which in the publicly released *Summary* calls for moving forward from “a period of strategic atrophy.” The *Summary NDS* expresses concern “that our competitive military advantage has been eroding” and it highlights the need to “build a more lethal force” through a “competitive approach to force development and a consistent, multiyear investment to restore warfighting readiness and field a lethal force. The size of our force matters.”³

To meet these recruiting goals, each branch of DoD has been required to implement aggressive policies to reverse a culture of downsizing caused by ten years of fiscal restraint. Despite these changes, DoD has struggled to meet its recruiting metrics and is faced with short- and long-term problematic challenges. In 2018, after realizing that the service could not attain its stated recruiting goal of eighty thousand troops (a 16 percent increase from 2017), the Army lowered its goal for that year to 76,500.⁴ Similarly, that same year, the Navy increased its accession goals by 14 percent, but, according to Vice Admiral Robert P. Burke, USN, Chief of Naval Personnel, there are “difficult times ahead” in attracting and recruiting the numbers of qualified sailors required for a future fleet expansion to 355 ships. Specifically, Vice Admiral Burke identified personnel shortages in areas such as nuclear power, advanced electronics, aviation, and cyber occupations—all specialties essential to the operational success of a technologically advanced naval force.⁵

While some analysts attribute the recruiting shortfall to the improving economy (the United States is experiencing its lowest unemployment rate in a decade), the paucity of recruits is symptomatic of a much larger societal problem. According to the Pentagon, of the thirty-four million seventeen-to-twenty-four-year-olds in the United States, 71 percent do not qualify for military service because of a lack of education, poor health, or criminal records, or some combination of these factors. Furthermore, only 1 percent of young people are both “eligible and inclined to have a conversation” with the military about possible service.⁶ These statistics clearly illustrate a harsh reality for the Pentagon’s recruitment plan and have compelled leaders within each service to search for solutions to improve recruitment rates.

In addition to the requirements associated with recruitment, the military is tasked with retaining the quality members it has indoctrinated, trained, and educated already. Current personnel shortages in technology-centric billets have resulted in major staffing gaps that are exacerbated by the excessive “time to train” required for each specialty. The current shortfall of Air Force pilots is estimated to be more than two thousand, for example.⁷ These manning deficits have

placed a greater strain on active-duty personnel as operational commitments have increased over the past seventeen years. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which represent the longest period of continuous war in American history, have required an operational tempo that is unsustainable. This environment has made the civilian sector much more appealing to many young people both within and outside the military.

THE MILLENNIALS (GENERATION Y) AND GENERATION Z

The Pew Research Center defines six generations or age groups on the basis of birth dates. In order, these are the “greatest generation,” the “silent generation,” “baby boomers,” “Generation X,” the “millennial generation,” and “Generation Z.”⁸ The millennial generation (also known as Generation Y) and Generation Z together are growing demographic groups that are projected to represent 75 percent of the global workforce by 2025.⁹ While some have characterized members of these generations as entitled narcissists who lack a traditional work ethic, they are instead the most educated, most informed, and most interconnected generations in history.¹⁰ The parameters of sociological generations vary by study, but for the purposes of this article the authors define millennials (Generation Y) as anyone born between 1981 and 1996 and Generation Z as anyone born from 1997 onward, although the authors’ focus on Generation Z includes only those persons approaching adulthood.¹¹ Since 2014, Generations Y and Z have become the largest living generations in the United States—including seventy-three million adult persons aged eighteen to thirty-four.¹² Members of Generation Y (as well as the older members of Generation Z) are climbing the leadership ranks of the American workforce already and logically will increase their influence on the civilian, military, and political ranks in the relatively near future.

For American millennials and older members of Generation Z, the world always has been volatile and complex. Many in these generations have no memory of the United States before the attacks of September 11, 2001, nor do they recall a day when the nation was not at war. Whereas members of previous generations viewed schools as safe havens, Generations Y and Z received their education in an environment impacted by tragic massacres at such places as Columbine High School in 1999, Virginia Tech in 2007, Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018, and dozens of others.¹³ Major global financial crises have influenced their views on financial security, while the concept of climate change has molded their outlook on the sustainability of the environment. For Generations Y and Z, these events have provoked a sense that the government is unable to provide for their personal security and have compelled them to value the present more than any other previous generation.¹⁴

Those persons born after 1981 have been raised in an information environment with continuous access to news, data, and social interaction. Over the past fifteen years, the American evolution of the Internet and smartphone technology has provided a bottomless source of information and completely altered the manner in which members of Generations Y and Z interact socially, compared with previous generations at the same stage in life.¹⁵ According to a study commissioned by the car-sharing company Zipcar, 40 percent of millennials believe that losing a smartphone would be a greater hardship than losing an automobile, computer, or television (compared with 16 percent of older generations who believe the same). Forty percent of those in Generations Y and Z prefer to text, e-mail, or video chat rather than interact in person.¹⁶ In a survey conducted by the World Economic Forum, 51 percent of Generations Y and Z gave their primary news sources as news websites and social media, while only 18 percent relied on television.¹⁷ Although they are aware that the accuracy of the content provided on these fora is questionable, the youngest generations prefer the convenience and speed associated with these avenues over the reliability of more-traditional news sources.

This combination of unfettered access to information and a sense that the government cannot provide for their security created the flash point for Generation Y's historic political involvement in 2008. (Generation Z was not yet of voting age.) That year, following decades of limited voter participation by the younger demographic, millennials turned out in record numbers for the presidential election. It was the largest voter turnout of young people since eighteen-to-twenty-year-olds were given the right to vote in 1972. During the 2008 election, 50 percent of adults in Generation X and older generations voted for Barack H. Obama. Generation Y overwhelmingly supported Obama and his message of change by more than a two-to-one ratio (66 percent to 32 percent).¹⁸ Following two years of his presidency, however, millennials' enthusiasm for politics began to wane. In 2015, for example, near the end of President Obama's second term, only 26 percent of millennials named government and politics as one of their top three topics of interest.¹⁹

Generations Y and Z's political involvement has evolved concurrently with their views on national security. In 2010, these generations were less supportive than their elders of an assertive national security policy and more supportive of a progressive social agenda.²⁰ In contrast, six years later, following the proliferation of the radical Islamist group ISIS, 60 percent of Generations Y and Z supported the increase in American involvement in Iraq and Syria, including the use of ground troops. When asked whether they would be willing to serve in the armed forces, however, only 15 percent of those surveyed conveyed any willingness to do so.²¹

Socially, Generations Y and Z are far more tolerant of differences in race, sexual orientation, and gender than previous generations. Two decades of Pew Research surveys confirm that those born after 1981 are the most open to change of any generational demographic, followed by Generation X, baby boomers, and the silent generation. In response to views on immigration, 58 percent of Generations Y and Z believe immigrants strengthen the country, while only 43 percent of older generations agree with that view. This same pattern is found in issues concerning nontraditional family arrangements (working mothers, unmarried cohabitation, and interracial marriage, as examples). Members of Generations Y and Z are far more accepting than previous generations of each of these modern family developments.²²

Professionally, the motivations, work habits, and expectations of Generations Y and Z are significantly different when compared with previous generations. Unlike the baby boomers and Generation X, who aspire for career and financial success, the most recent generations are motivated largely by a desire to make a positive contribution to the greater good. While previous generations valued long-term predictability and changed jobs less frequently, members of Generations Y and Z “seek non-linear career trajectories that will compel them to change jobs more frequently.”²³ Their decision to change jobs often is inspired by the failure of an organization to commit to its employees’ development. In a 2016 Gallup poll, 87 percent of those born after 1981 cited professional development or career growth opportunities as “very important” to them in a job. Finally, members of Generations Y and Z want to enjoy their time in the workplace and thrive in a work environment that is social, spontaneous, and less structured. More than any other generation, Generations Y and Z seek a “work-life” balance that enables them to enjoy their life experience.²⁴

When it comes to matters of personal life, the youngest generations place marriage and parenthood far above everything else. When polled by the Pew Research Center, Generations Y and Z listed their top three priorities as “being a good parent” (52 percent), “having a successful marriage” (30 percent), and “helping others in need” (21 percent).²⁵ While only six out of ten were raised by two parents, members of Generations Y and Z have a strong commitment to their families. Compared with previous generations, they are more educated, especially the women. In 2017, a woman aged twenty-one to thirty-six was 7 percent more likely than a man of the same age to have at least a bachelor’s degree and 8 percent more likely than a woman of Generation X. In a 2017 survey, males and females aged twenty-one to thirty-six were 6.5 percent more likely than members of Generation X to have at least a bachelor’s degree.²⁶

In summary, Generations Y and Z have matured in an age of insecurity that has compelled them to value flexibility and tolerance in society. They have

experienced a technological revolution that has provided unlimited and immediate access to information. As a result of these factors, they have developed into generations that lack confidence in their government. Data show very few have an interest in joining the military. They place significant importance on their personal and professional development as well as that of their children, and they are more inclined to be tolerant of societal differences. Significant numbers of persons in these generations are motivated by the betterment of society and professional flexibility, and they prefer to operate in a relaxed atmosphere that enables freedom of thought and creativity.

THE PROBLEM AND GENERATIONS Y AND Z

In 1973 the United States eliminated military conscription and transitioned to an all-volunteer force (AVF). Since its establishment, the AVF has been a major success, as it has increased the quality of new recruits, the number of personnel who pursue a full military career, and the professionalism and proficiency of the force.²⁷ This success, however, has been contingent on the availability of sufficient individuals qualified for military service and willing to serve. Following a decade of downsizing since 2008, the military has been reduced to the smallest it has been since before World War II. However, as noted earlier, the Pentagon now has been tasked with expanding its forces while at the same time facing a shrinking pool of young Americans who both meet the eligibility requirements and are inclined to serve. To maintain its AVF, DoD is challenged to enhance the appeal of military service and overcome the obstacles of a generation that does not meet the recruiting standards as they currently exist.

In an effort to enhance the appeal of military service, the Pentagon, and, for example, the Navy, has instituted a series of programs designed to increase the recruitment and retention of Generations Y and Z. DoD has implemented initiatives such as Force of the Future, the blended retirement system, and Sailor 2025 in an attempt to increase career flexibility and provide incentives for retention and advancement to attract more members of Generations Y and Z to military service. More recently, the FY18 NDAA has allocated \$148 billion to account for a 2.6 percent military pay raise in 2019, the largest since fiscal year 2010. Not included in this raise are 2.9 percent and 3.4 percent increases in the housing and food allowances, respectively. While these programs represent steps toward progress, they do not address adequately the primary reasons for Generations Y and Z's reluctance to consider military service.²⁸

Unlike for previous generations (baby boomers and Generation X), monetary gain has limited appeal for Generations Y and Z. Therefore, financial incentives alone are not effective tools to recruit and retain them. In fact, in a study conducted prior to the passage of the FY18 NDAA, researchers from the Center for a

New American Security concluded that military members are compensated better than their civilian counterparts.²⁹ Rather than enhancing an already positive aspect of military service (i.e., compensation), DoD should implement policies designed to enhance job satisfaction, provide professional flexibility, and promote better family stability—all employment characteristics that Generations Y and Z desire. Such policies would include, for example, limiting the frequency of PCS moves and enhancing the ability of honorably separated servicemembers to reenter the force following successful tenures in the civilian sector.

While the enactment of policies targeting the evolution of generational priorities might address Generations Y and Z's willingness to serve and improve recruiting efforts, the Pentagon still is challenged by the lack of eligible candidates. In 2009, a group consisting of ninety-nine retired flag officers and senior enlisted leaders formed the nonprofit organization Mission: Readiness. This group determined that the principal reasons that nearly three-quarters of Americans aged seventeen to twenty-four were not eligible for military service were criminality, inadequate education, and poor physical fitness.³⁰ More recently, the former commander of Marine Corps Recruiting Command Major General Mark Brilakis, USMC, stated, "There are thirty some million seventeen to twenty-four-year-olds out there, but by the time you get all the way down to those that are qualified [for military service], you're down to less than a million young Americans."³¹

Across all branches of service, the military requires an individual to have a high school diploma or a general equivalency diploma (GED) to ensure that a recruit possesses the minimum level of education to complete an organized training program and perform his or her duties successfully. According to the National Center for Education Statistics report on 2014–15 public high school graduation rates, "the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for public high school students rose to eighty-three percent."³² Although this statistic is positive, the results are skewed by a substantial caveat. The rate was derived from the number of students enrolled in comprehensive high schools, but it omitted students from alternative programs, which typically comprise those most at risk of dropping out. The statistic also fails to consider the reality that the public school system has lowered its graduation standards.³³ According to the Mission: Readiness report, the lowered graduation standards contribute to the fact that only 70 percent of potential recruits who possess a high school diploma are able to pass the Armed Forces Qualification Test, eliminating 30 percent of the potential pool.³⁴

With regard to criminality, the armed forces jointly adhere to a "common standard of moral behavior as a means of evaluating a recruit's ability to succeed in military service."³⁵ Although the requirements differ among branches, each branch disqualifies candidates for a conviction of a crime and determines whether a potential recruit with a criminal record poses too great a liability. According

to the Mission: Readiness report, “one in ten young adults cannot join the service because they have at least one conviction for a felony or serious misdemeanor.”³⁶ This statistic, when applied to the population of thirty-four million seventeen-to-twenty-four-year-olds, indicates that 3.4 million young people are not eligible for recruitment because of a criminal background.

By far, the most significant disqualifier that impacts recruiting stems from the health crisis plaguing American youth. According to the former commander of U.S. Army Recruiting Command Major General Allen Batschelet, USA (Ret.), “the biggest culprit keeping young adults from qualifying to serve in the United States military is health concerns, mostly obesity.”³⁷ The Mission: Readiness report states that “twenty-seven percent of young Americans are too overweight to join the military. Many are simply turned away by recruiters and others never try to join. Of those who attempt to join the services roughly 15,000 young potential recruits fail their entrance physicals every year because they are overweight.”³⁸

Culturally, little has been done to address this health crisis, so these numbers are expected to climb. According to data from the 2013–14 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 17.2 percent of American youth ages two to nineteen were likely to be considered obese, while 6 percent were considered to be morbidly obese. Furthermore, when the current pool of seventeen-to-twenty-four-year-olds was polled in 2013–14, 20.6 percent of them were considered obese and 9.1 percent were considered extremely obese.³⁹ When applied to the group of potential military recruits, the data indicate that over ten million young adults do not meet the current physical standards to join the military, and in future years this problem will become worse—creating a major dilemma for the future military force.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

In the current period of desired military growth, the Pentagon is challenged by the youngest generations’ lacking both the willingness and, in large measure, the ability to serve. To solve this problem, military leaders will need to consider modifying—modernizing—DoD recruiting policies to make them more relevant to Generations Y and Z, and future generations as well. Military leaders have taken steps to address some of the issues raised in this article, but much more needs to be done, as noted in the recommendations that follow. As the first course of action, so as to enhance the appeal of military service, incentives tailored to the values of Generations Y and Z must be put in place. A monetary incentive alone is not an adequate tool to entice generations that value professional freedom, personal growth, and family stability. Second, the military cannot control the societal and cultural trends that are leading to an ever-diminishing pool of eligible candidates. The services therefore must assess eligibility standards internally and

consider making the necessary or appropriate changes so as to recruit effectively the number of servicemembers needed for the force. Although these solutions may appear to be relatively simple, the reality of these modifications will require fundamental changes to the manner in which the armed forces conduct themselves. The following are suggested courses of action to consider.

Career Flexibility

The Naval Postgraduate School sponsored a 2013 study in which 481 community college students (the overwhelming majority of whom were born after 1981) were polled to assess generational attitudes toward military service. When asked, “What would make the military a more attractive career option?” the largest group of those polled, 39 percent, indicated that “more flexibility / more personal freedom” was needed.⁴⁰ Although these results were derived from a relatively small sample, the outcome is consistent with a 2016 survey conducted by LinkedIn. This survey was posed to members of the professional networking site and intended to assess the rate of “job-hopping” by different generations five years after graduation from college. According to the data, those who graduated between 2006 and 2010 switched jobs nearly twice as frequently as those who graduated between 1986 and 1990. This indicated a desire for job flexibility and the freedom to change professions.⁴¹

In light of these results, many civilian organizations have changed their personnel strategies to remain competitive. The health-care industry, which has been quick to realize the benefits of catering to evolving generational values, has been extremely successful in establishing long-term relationships with former employees, so that it might be possible to intercept them on the rebound from their next jobs. Scripps Health in San Diego, which counts 67 percent of its recent hires as members of Generations Y and Z, instituted an alumni program to court former staff. Since the program’s inception, Scripps reports that about 20 percent of employees return to the company within a year of leaving.⁴²

While the civilian sector attempts to ease the return of members of Generations Y and Z to previous employers, the military has neglected to adopt this type of strategy. Although each service has programs dedicated to the recruitment of prior-service personnel, they are inconsistent in their definition of prior service, are highly restrictive, and often require extensive waiting periods. Specifically, each branch of DoD considers a prior-service enlistment billet as a reenlistment slot. As a result, the service must be below their goal of reenlistments for a prior-service recruit to have the opportunity to return.⁴³

Over the past several years, each service has met its reenlistment goals and therefore has had limited prior-service quotas. Although by itself this fact indicates that prior-service reenry is unnecessary to maintain a military force, it fails

to consider the fiscal environment in which it occurred. During these years, DoD was in the midst of downsizing to the smallest force in nearly seventy years; now the Pentagon is tasked with reversing these trends and increasing the size of the force. When this fact is combined with the limited pool of eligible candidates, officials should consider modifying current policy to prioritize attracting prior members to return to the service in an expedited manner.

A specific area requiring review is the rank of reenlisting personnel. Currently, the rank (and therefore the pay and responsibility level) of a prior-service recruit is determined by the needs of the respective services. As a result, a person could be readmitted to the service at a level that is subordinate to what he or she already achieved during his or her previous enlistment period. Perhaps more importantly, no consideration is given to the education and professional accomplishments a person may have achieved in the civilian sector. In contrast, the civilian sector rewards returning employees with opportunities that are commensurate with their accomplishments in other organizations. To compete with the civilian job market, the military needs to adopt a comparable policy and reward prior-service candidates with exceptional performance and accomplishments outside the services by reenlisting them at a higher rank. The military does this already in special instances, mostly among staff officers. For example, medical doctors or lawyers may enter the service at a higher rank than a typical entry-level officer, because their accomplishments and credentials are considered. This approach should be examined for all reenlistments.

Permanent Change of Station

DoD spends more than four billion dollars (nearly 4 percent of the annual military personnel budget) to relocate active-duty personnel. Statistically, PCS moves affect nearly one-third of the armed forces annually, and each move requires an average military family to find new schools for children and new careers for spouses (if that is even possible) every two to three years. The PCS system was developed during a period when 10 percent of servicemembers had families; today 70 percent have at least one dependent. The system increases government costs and imposes difficult circumstances on servicemembers and their families.⁴⁴

The current PCS system has substantial financial impact on families. According to analysis provided by the RAND National Defense Research Institute, PCS moves hinder the career progress of military spouses, thereby weakening the financial security of military families. Through its analysis, RAND concluded that military spouses who are active in the labor force report a 28 percent reduction in earnings owing to PCS moves.⁴⁵ The reduction is even more significant in light of the findings of a separate study conducted by Capella University. According to the Capella study, 22 percent of spouses stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina,

and Fort Hood, Texas, reported that they were working “beneath their education and experience level.”⁴⁶ When we apply these findings to the RAND analysis, it is logical to deduce that the reduction in earnings for military families is actually even more substantial than the 28 percent noted above.

As Generations Y and Z continue to mature, the impact of the current PCS system on recruitment and retention only will increase. When the current system was formulated, only 40 percent of all women were participating in the workforce; today 71 percent of working-age women born after 1981 are employed, and 36 percent have earned at least a bachelor’s degree. Members of Generations Y and Z (both men and women) are the most educated demographic in the nation’s history and are more career focused than any of their predecessors.⁴⁷ PCS moves limit career opportunities, a fact that makes these generations less willing to enter or remain in military service. If recruiting and retention are to be improved, the Pentagon must modernize its PCS policies and better align them with the civilian sector.

It appears the Pentagon is aware of this reality. In a recent interview with the *Fayetteville Observer*, Robert Wilkie, former Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, acknowledged that the military’s current way of doing business is outdated and in need of review. Specifically, he was critical of the traditional PCS system, the detriment this system causes families, and the effect it has on retention. According to Wilkie, “We have an industrial age system, but we are living in a new age.” To meet the demands of the modern military family, Wilkie suggested the concept of extended tours at major installations that would decrease the frequency of PCS moves while still providing the needed career opportunities for servicemembers. He further contends that installations such as Fort Bragg, Camp Lejeune, and Naval Station Norfolk are large enough to provide the career opportunities for servicemembers without placing the burden of moving on their families.⁴⁸ This is a step in the right direction, but alone it will not address the problem adequately.

A better solution is to limit PCS moves for junior personnel within the officer corps and enlisted ranks (O-3 and below and E-6 and below). This approach would create a more solid foundation for military families, spouses, and children while increasing the incentive to enter or remain in military service. This type of policy would enhance the stability of families, and the increased rate of retention would enable the military to earn a better return on investment on training costs. As the battlefield becomes more technologically advanced, the cost to train future forces will increase, often radically. Additionally, owing to technology advancements, it can be argued that in many instances PCS moves no longer are necessary. These advancements, including advanced communications, autonomous weapons systems, and cyber warfare, have diminished the differences associated with each respective installation, thereby alleviating the operational necessity

to move personnel. As a result, by decreasing the frequency of PCS moves, the Pentagon would enable military families to enjoy greater stability and working spouses to pursue a career.

Standards beyond the Control of the Pentagon

The Pentagon's ability to recruit future servicemembers is predicated on society's ability to educate, nurture, and care for its youth. In regard to each of these tasks, Generations Y and Z have been neglected. According to the Mission: Readiness report, of Americans aged seventeen to twenty-four, one in four lacks a high school diploma, one in ten has at least one prior conviction for a felony or serious misdemeanor, and nearly one in three is considered obese.⁴⁹ These three findings represent the Pentagon's greatest impediments to attaining current and future recruitment goals. Because of its inability to control the societal trends that are leading to the dwindling number of eligible candidates, DoD needs to assess its eligibility standards internally and make the necessary changes to recruit and retain the force effectively.

The inability of young people to earn a high school diploma or GED, for example, eliminates nearly 25 percent of potential recruits. While it is obvious that underlying issues in the educational system need to be addressed, the military does not have the luxury of waiting for those benefits to be realized. One immediate solution is the development of a DoD GED preparatory program that requires military enlistment on completion; it could be made available through local recruiting offices. Such a program not only would provide individuals with the opportunity to earn a high school education but would use guaranteed employment in the armed forces to incentivize completing the curriculum. Once the curriculum is established, the program likely would require minimal funding and oversight. Such a program certainly would enhance military recruiting, especially considering the benefits. If only 1 percent of seventeen-to-twenty-four-year-olds who currently lack a high school degree participated in such a program, the armed services would expand the recruitment pool by 85,000 candidates.

With regard to criminality, recent history suggests that lowering the present standards can result in a higher rate of misconduct within the force. According to Lieutenant General Tom Spoehr, USA (Ret.), "The Army learned a painful lesson in 2009. We lowered the standards, we signed more waivers for people who had acts of criminality than we usually did. We paid the price. These people we let in eventually caused misconduct, were separated for dishonorable reasons more than normal soldiers. The last place that we would go is to mess with the standards."⁵⁰ While the lowered standards may have been the root source of the disciplinary issues, it also is possible that the method of granting the waivers was ineffective. Each recruit seeking a criminality waiver should be investigated

thoroughly and evaluated on an individual basis. If this was not the manner in which the waivers were issued in 2009, officials should give further consideration to incorporating a thorough, individualized process now. Although a meticulous review of each candidate would be arduous, the gained value of eligible personnel would be significant. Currently, 3.4 million seventeen-to-twenty-four-year-olds are ineligible owing to criminal records.⁵¹ If only 1 percent of these individuals were worthy of a waiver, the number of potential recruits would increase by 34,000.

The largest discriminator of potential recruits involves the physical fitness standards that currently disqualify 27 percent of applicants.⁵² This statistic, combined with the fact that obesity has more than doubled over the past four decades, suggests that the number of eligible candidates will continue to decrease in the future if the current physical standards are not modified.⁵³ Despite this austere prospect, military leadership has been steadfast in maintaining the physical requirements associated with military service. According to Major General Jeffrey Snow, USA, commanding general of U.S. Army Recruiting Command, “We don’t want to sacrifice quality. If we lower the quality, yes we might be able to meet our mission [achieving recruiting goals], but that’s not good for the organization. The American public has come to expect a qualified Army that can defend the nation. I don’t think the American public would like us to lower the quality of those joining the Army if they knew it’s going to impact our ability to perform the very functions our nation expects us to do.”⁵⁴ While Snow’s sentiment has some validity, the Army’s failure to meet its 2018 recruiting goals indicates that a reassessment of recruiting standards is very much needed.

To justify changing the military’s current physical standards, it is necessary to consider the future nature of warfare and the types of actual jobs and responsibilities that eventually would be assigned to prospective recruits. According to Dr. Jacquelyn Schneider, a professor at the Naval War College, the “victors of future war will be those states that are best able to harness autonomy and human-machine integration.” As cyber warfare and autonomous weapon systems continue to advance, warfare is expanding in dramatic ways into high-technology theaters requiring technical skills such as computer programming, big-data analysis, and advanced weapon systems’ operation. The need for intellectual capacity to “adapt to high-tech threats to high-tech machines in real time” is becoming more prevalent throughout many facets of warfare.⁵⁵

In the future of high-tech warfare, the ability of a servicemember to do push-ups is irrelevant. As a result, the military should consider tailoring its physical specifications to the specialty that each prospective recruit is pursuing. To be sure, current physical standards need to be upheld for servicemembers assuming roles in traditional combat specialties that are physically demanding. However,

for recruits who will contribute to the fight from their keyboards, away from a battlefield, a reduction of required physical standards needs to be considered. While it is difficult to calculate the exact impact these changes will have on potential recruits, it is logical to assume that they will expand the eligibility pool of recruits significantly and enable DoD to enhance recruitment goals greatly, particularly with technologically savvy individuals who might not meet current physical standards. Altering the physical standards could have a significant effect on the culture of the armed services and possibly the operating capacity of the future force. Despite the potential repercussions, altering recruiting standards is a viable option to ensure recruitment goals are met.

The armed services of the United States are at a crossroads. At a time when there is a call for reinvigorating the military and expanding the number of servicemembers, the youngest generations have insufficient interest in pursuing a military career, and the services are having problems retaining the men and women who have taken the oath already. The costs associated with these realities are expensive in terms of recruiting and continually training new members to develop the skills needed to replace those servicemembers who decide not to pursue long-term military careers. This, of course, impacts the readiness of the military and the ability of the services to fulfill their ever-expanding missions. The challenge facing the Pentagon is to increase the pool of prospective recruits substantially and develop incentives to retain members already in the services who are considering leaving.

Perhaps the key factor to improve recruiting and retention is to understand Generations Y and Z and make the requisite efforts to identify their motivations and determine what can be done to entice them to pursue military careers. This is not a simple matter; it requires considering and modifying existing standards and adopting many new policies, some of which may be considered controversial. Maintaining the status quo is not an option, since it is clear that such an approach will lead to a failure to recruit future personnel and to retain those already in the service in sufficient numbers. The younger generations differ from those previous in terms of what attracts them to careers. They are inclined to job-hop, often returning to employment with organizations for which they previously worked. Financial incentives, while important, are not their only motivation. These generations have a need to be part of organizations that value their service. They place a high priority on families and on a work-life balance. As members of the most educated generations in history, Generations Y and Z spouses desire professional pursuits commensurate with their education and experience. Compounding these issues is the fact that a majority of those born after 1981 do not meet the current standards of eligibility for military service.

If the military hopes to improve the recruitment and retention of current and future generations, policies must be modified and adopted. The Pentagon should consider taking steps to portray the military as a profession conducive to generational motives and viewpoints. Other options for improving recruitment and retention include improving family and professional lifestyles by changing existing PCS policies and revising physical standards to match them with military occupations. Furthermore, DoD could consider developing a military GED program with military career placement following completion and developing a program to review, on a case-by-case basis, young people with criminal records to determine whether they are ready to leave their pasts behind and pursue honorable military futures.

Discussion already has begun in many of these areas, but it is time to double down on those discussions and potentially to take radical steps to enhance the ability of the military to attract and retain young people. Failure to do so threatens the future security of the United States.

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