

**Lt. General David W. Barno, USA (Ret.)**  
Visiting Professor of Strategic Studies  
Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies

**Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs**

**hearing titled**

**“Ensuring Force Readiness: Examining Progressivism’s Impact on an All-Volunteer Military.”**

**March 28, 2023**  
**Committee on Oversight and Accountability**

The U.S. military is facing a recruiting crisis of unprecedented magnitude today. I served for 30 years of my life on active duty in the U.S. Army as an infantry officer, Ranger and paratrooper, and commanded U.S. forces at every level from lieutenant to lieutenant general. I served in combat three times, culminating in my 19 months as the overall U.S. commander in Afghanistan in the early days of the war. Yet I have never seen a greater challenge to the all-volunteer force than the one we face today.

This crisis has many complex causes – but so-called “wokeism” in the military is not one of them. Let me be clear: **there is no data that support the argument that “wokeism” has a precipitated a decline in U.S. combat readiness, nor is there any correlation between “wokeism” and the current difficulty in attracting new recruits.**<sup>1</sup> However, the overheated and unsupported rhetoric on this topic does have harmful consequences, which exacerbates the recruiting crisis and undermines military effectiveness in ways that are the exact opposite of what this debate intends.

Since the draft ended in 1973, the U.S. military has had to recruit volunteers to fill its ranks. Every military operation since then – including the invasions of Grenada and Panama in the 1980s, the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the peacekeeping operations in the 1990s, and the long-running wars since 2001 in Iraq and Afghanistan – has been conducted by high-quality volunteers, who have rightfully earned the esteem of the nation. Yet today, that force is at risk. The Army missed its recruiting goal last year by 15,000 soldiers – more than 25 percent of its target – and the other services barely met theirs.<sup>2</sup> The current year’s prospects for all the services appear equally dim. If the trends for the Army alone continue, service officials have warned that the Army could shrink by over 30,000 soldiers between 2022 and the end of 2023, or nearly 7 percent of its active force.<sup>3</sup> If these trends do not change, the lack of qualified and motivated volunteers will jeopardize the national security of the United States, by leaving the military too small to address the challenges and threats of the years and decades ahead.

U.S. military recruiting today faces a crisis in both eligibility – those *qualified* to serve – and in propensity – those who *want* to serve. The percentage of young Americans who meet the military’s entrance standards had hovered around 30 percent for more than a decade, but last year that number suddenly dropped to an all-time low of 23 percent.<sup>4</sup> This is a shockingly low number that threatens the viability of the all-volunteer force. This sudden decline was partly due to the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused standardized test scores to drop; increased diagnoses of mental health conditions like depression and anxiety; and increasing youth obesity rates. None of these trends will rebound quickly, and some may never return to their pre-pandemic levels.

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, a recent publication by two members of Congress alleges that wokeism and political ideology are weakening the U.S. military – but it does not contain a single piece of data or a credible source to support any of its assertions. See The Offices of U.S. Senator Marco Rubio & U.S. Representative Chip Roy, *Woke Warfighters: How Political Ideology is Weakening America’s Military*, November 21, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Lolita C. Baldor, “Army Missed Recruiting Goal by 15,000 Soldiers,” Associated Press, October 2, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Lolita C Baldor, “Army Cuts Force Size Amid Unprecedented Battle for Recruits,” Associated Press, July 19, 2022; Davis Winkie, “Can the Army Fill Its Ranks?” *Army Times*, December 26, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> See David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “Addressing the U.S. Military Recruiting Crisis,” *War on the Rocks*, March 10, 2023.

Equally disturbing is the other half of the equation: the propensity to serve. Before the pandemic, polls showed that only 13 percent of young Americans said they would consider military service. Last year that number shrank further, to a mere 9 percent.<sup>5</sup> These figures are simply unsustainable for the volunteer military to remain a robust high-quality force. Too few recruits mean a shrinking military – at a time when the strategic threats facing the United States around the world are continuing to multiply.

The services are developing some innovative ways to improve military eligibility. The Army, for example, pioneered a pre-boot camp program to help otherwise eligible recruits improve their academic performance, fitness levels, or both. The Army is now expanding this successful program, and the Navy has just started a similar effort of its own.<sup>6</sup> Other initiatives are looking at the logic of excluding candidates for youthful medical conditions and treatments that are relatively commonplace in our society today, such as successful treatment for ADHD or depression. Those are all moves in the right direction that will not adversely impact standards or the likelihood to complete first terms of service, as recent research has shown.<sup>7</sup>

Propensity to serve – how to get more young Americans to consider military service – is a harder problem. Though the all-volunteer force has been a great success, it has had one tremendous Achilles’ heel: it has created an ever-widening gap between the U.S. military and the American people.<sup>8</sup> Fewer and fewer young Americans are exposed to the U.S. military each year, as military service has increasingly become a family business. Today, more than 80 percent of the young people who join the military today have a family member in the military – and between 25 and 30 percent have a parent in the military.<sup>9</sup>

Congress can help improve the propensity to serve by extolling the virtues of service in uniform in the ways that were commonplace throughout the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Repeatedly and publicly castigating the U.S. military as a “woke” institution is both wrong and directly undercuts efforts at military recruiting among swaths of young Americans. It effectively *discourages* young men and women from serving, at the very time when the services are struggling to meet their end strength numbers.

Recruiting young Americans demands that the military find ways to attract more young people who would otherwise not consider military service. To do that, and to retain the best of those

---

<sup>5</sup> Dave Philipps, “With Few Able and Fewer Willing, U.S. Military Can’t Find Recruits,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 2022; Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth’s Remarks to the 2022 AUSA Opening Ceremony (As Prepared), October 10, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Steve Beynon, “Army Expanding Pre-Boot Camp Course for Overweight and Low-Scoring Applicants,” *Military.com*, November 23, 2022; Rebecca Kheel, “Navy Follows Army in Offering Prep Courses to Recruits Who Don’t Meet Fitness, Academic Standards,” *Military.com*, March 22, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Beth J. Asch et al., “An Empirical Assessment of the U.S. Army’s Enlistment Waiver Policies,” RR-4431-A, RAND Corporation, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Much has been written on the growing civil-military gap in the United States. For good overviews, see Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001; Kori Schake and Jim Mattis, eds., *Warriors and Citizens: American Views of Our Military*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2016; and Rosa Brooks, “Are U.S. Civil-Military Relations in Crisis?” *Parameters*, Volume 50 Number 1 (Spring 2021), pp. 51-63.

<sup>9</sup> Dave Philipps and Tim Arango, “Who Signs Up to Fight? Makeup of U.S. Recruits Shows Glaring Disparity,” *The New York Times*, January 10, 2020.

troops for the ranks of its leadership, the U.S. military always emphasized equal opportunity for all, regardless of race, creed, or gender.

Put unequivocally, military efforts to recognize that diversity, inclusion, and equity within the force are both valuable and essential. The U.S. military is a team of teams, and a remarkably diverse force comprised of individuals from all across this great country. The U.S. military today is more diverse than it has ever been – and that is one of its great strengths. More than 17 percent of those who serve on active duty are women, as are more than 21 percent of those who serve in the reserve component. Racial minorities comprise almost one-quarter of those who serve in both the active and reserve components, and ethnic minorities serve in slightly smaller percentages.<sup>10</sup> Forging that diverse body into a cohesive team is a priority task of all military leaders, which requires understanding and appreciating the differences among their fellow soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and guardians.

One of my earliest recollections of my own time in uniform was a session on race relations in my first weeks at West Point in the summer of 1972.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. military at the time was a deeply broken force at the end of the Vietnam War, with widespread drug abuse and indiscipline in the ranks. Race relations were tense, with violent riots between whites and blacks erupting in the barracks and aboard warships at sea. President Richard Nixon was then in the fourth year of his presidency and Melvin Laird was the Secretary of Defense. Neither were liberal progressives, but this training was required across the entire U.S. military during their watch. These efforts to frankly address the underlying issues between the races at this fraught time marking the very beginning of the all-volunteer force contributed greatly to building the cohesive force we have today. At the same time, parallel initiatives to significantly expand the participation of women in the force helped greatly improve the quality of the all-volunteer force in its early years.

In sum, efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion – under a variety of names – have been a part of the U.S. military ever since the draft was abolished in 1973. Republicans and Democrats in the White House and in Congress have supported these worthy efforts for five decades. In my judgement, our unified commitment to these values has been one of the fundamental reasons for the incredible strength of the all-volunteer force. My long military career convinced me that the effectiveness and success of our strikingly diverse and talented force strongly rely upon it. Our potential adversaries can only marvel at that success. Abandoning this uniquely American advantage will only make our military less cohesive and less capable in the face of our future foes.

---

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *2021 Demographics Report: Profile of the Military Community*, pp. 18, 24, 28, 64, 71, 76.

<sup>11</sup> See David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “Reflections on the Curse of Racism Within the U.S. Military,” *War on the Rocks*, June 30, 2020.