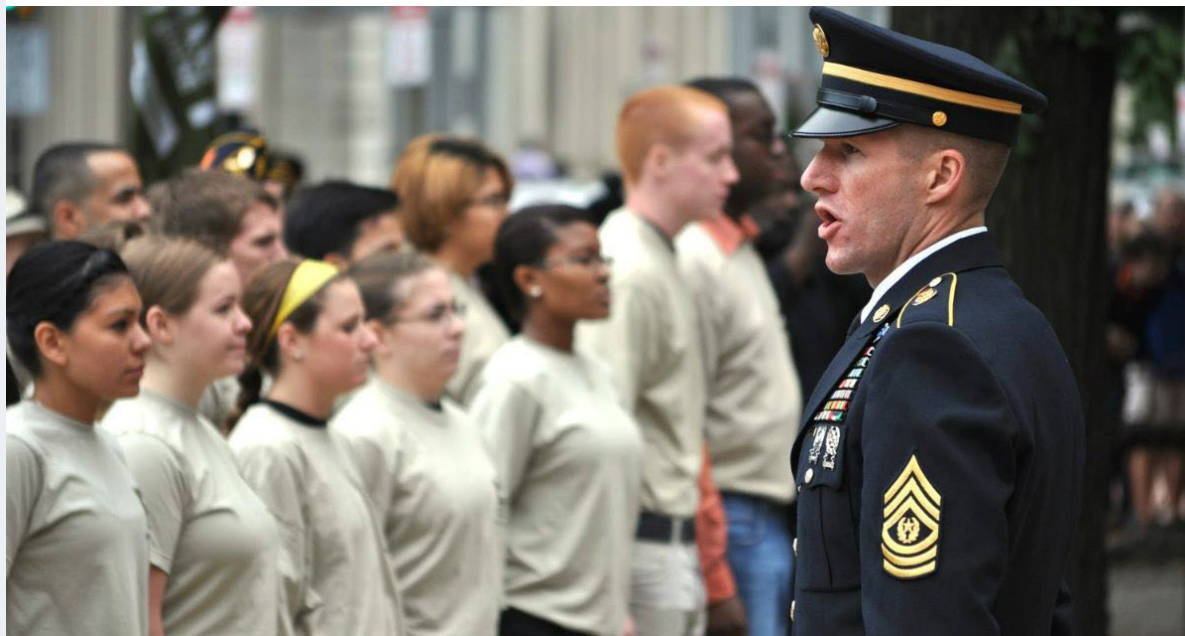


IT'S NOT THE ECONOMY: WHY THE ARMY MISSED ITS RECRUITMENT GOALS AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

James Long | 02.14.19



In 2018 the US Army failed to meet its recruitment goals for the first time since the [height of the Iraq war in 2005](#). Military leaders have attributed that failure to the [strong US job market](#) drawing talent away with the promise of lucrative private sector careers. While the health of the economy is a factor, blaming this for recruitment shortcoming is a fundamentally misleading narrative that misses an important opportunity for the Army. Instead of pointing to the continued growth of the economy as the driver of slow recruitment, we would be better served by owning our shortcomings and embracing new and innovative force-multiplying strategies.

Force Size Does Not Equal Military Capability

In 2012's [presidential debates](#), [President Barack Obama](#) addressed Governor Mitt Romney's criticism about downsizing the Navy by challenging his metric: "Well, Governor, we also have fewer horses and bayonets, because the nature of our military's changed. We

have these things called aircraft carriers. . . . The question is not a game of *Battleship*. . . . It's what our capabilities are."

Of course, it's important to identify the appropriate end strength for the Army. But doing so in a way that directly correlates troop numbers and military strength is an error, much like the strategic miscalculation behind Saddam Hussein's Gulf War hubris in promising the "mother of all battles" before his army's defeat in a one-hundred-hour ground war by technologically superior rivals.

Using troop numbers as a measurement of military strength, rather than as one of several components of it, owes much to overly general definitions of readiness, as the Cato Institute's Benjamin Friedman laments: "The general concept of readiness often happens without a conversation about what the forces are for. [Advocates of a larger force] do not know exactly what they want to do, except that they want a bigger military." Critics have pointed to the Army's bias toward vast offensive maneuver forces as a strategic miscalculation, particularly dangerous as rivals refine hybrid and political warfare strategies to undermine America's international influence, circumvent our conventional dominance, and exploit vulnerabilities within democratic societies.

Operations targeting our electoral system, like Russia's Translator Project, offer disproportionate strategic returns on investment; in 2016, just eighty people targeted millions of Americans in "purple states" on social media. While the US Army has organic information operations capabilities, a Rand Corporation review discovered US strategy tends to focus externally and neglect attacks against "zones of interior" (i.e., the US homeland) leaving our strategy "incomplete" and "of declining relevance to the likely future international strategic environment."

The global operating environment and the character of warfare are changing—and the military has a vital role to play amid rising levels of global competition. And as the Army rightly embraces new capabilities, like the security force assistance brigades and expansion of cyber operations, it may be time to reconsider the way it conceptualizes military capability, and the role that troop numbers play in that framework.

An Alternative Approach

As the Army balances international commitments and modernization challenges, complementing its focus on resources (budget size and troop numbers) with deliberate efforts to maximize resourcefulness (harnessing force-multiplying technologies and talent management strategies) can provide a way forward. In a recent policy brief, experts from the Brookings Institute supported this change, writing that "increased force size" is "the least important [objective] to the U.S. military for the foreseeable future, and by training away resources needed elsewhere, increasing force size is actually counter-productive."

This requires a pivot from an industrial-era personnel management model, which treats people like an inventory of interchangeable parts that must be stamped with a series of "qualifying" assignments in environments that prioritize activity over mastery. Instead, the Army must embrace talent management strategies that invest in empowering the right people by seeking quality over quantity, minimizing unnecessary demands so that can master the military arts, and amplifying their capabilities by integrating advanced technologies.

1. Do Not Compete for Leftovers

The assumption that private sector job growth decreases available recruits for the Army assumes that people prefer private sector careers and only consider joining the military primarily when other choices are exhausted or not available. If this is true, instead of the military getting the best of the best, we get the best of what is left. While the Army can rarely compete on salary, it does have a powerful mission-orientated case to make to prospective recruits.

Emphasizing that mission can be particularly impactful in communities that the Army currently needs most desperately—particularly technologists, data scientists, and computer programmers. While Fortune 500 companies have competitive remuneration packages, the military offers a unique opportunity for America's brightest minds to apply themselves to complex defense problems.

A 2006 study showing that male military officers are three times more likely than other American men to become CEOs is an example of a strong data point that recruiters can leverage. While engaging communities with minimal military exposure is challenging, research shows that even a single meeting with a recruiter greatly increases individuals' propensity toward joining.

As an Army, we cannot be surprised that we are failing to attract the latest generation of talent with a personnel system seen as

antiquated and dysfunctional by all levels of leadership, [from the secretary of defense on down](#). The growth of programs like the Air Force's [Kessel Run](#) highlights the Army's comparative [cultural shortcomings](#) when it comes to connecting talent with national security missions.

Army modernization efforts create natural opportunities for modern talent, especially by advancing programs that allow [experts to serve with an elevated rank](#), expanding forums for civil-military problem solving, and highlighting how military service can empower recent college graduates with leadership development and [college debt repayment programs](#).

For those interested in contributing, but disinterested in active duty, critical skill gaps can be bridged with efforts like the [Army Reserve's 75th Innovation Command](#) or creating panels where civilian experts serve as advisors, mirroring the success of the [Defense Innovation Board](#). These forums could expand to create service opportunities on gig-based projects, such as allowing civilian experts to partner with operational units and develop technical requirements to guide innovative acquisitions components like the [Defense Innovation Unit](#).

2. Close Gaps by Investing in Capabilities

Military strength metrics should focus on capabilities and end states, requiring a broader conversation about integrating technologies like artificial intelligence and automation. [McKinsey](#) research suggests that the Army's [6,500-candidate](#) recruitment shortfall could be immediately addressed by integrating automation. The research found that "30% of the activities in 60% of all occupations could be automated" and "5% of occupations could be fully automated by currently demonstrated technologies."

The Army's embrace of new technologies needs to graduate from platitude to practice. A hybrid workforce integrating current technologies, like automation and robotics, would increase agility and allow smaller troop numbers to project equivalent or greater force. This is no longer the realm of futurism; transformational impact is possible by accelerating efforts to [integrate 3-D printing](#) or [tactical software applications](#), and this effort is ideally suited to [empowering military entrepreneurs](#) to pursue disruptive innovation.

3. Prioritize Talent Retention

In [February 2011](#), then [Defense Secretary Bob Gates](#) told West Point cadets that "[the] greatest challenge facing your Army and my main worry [is]: How can the Army break up the institutional concrete, its bureaucratic rigidity in its assignments and promotion processes, in order to retain, challenge, and inspire its best, brightest, and most battle-tested young officers." Despite his emphasis and leaders like retired Lt. Gen. Dave Barno calling human capital the military's "[crown jewel](#)," self-inflicted wounds still lead to hemorrhage talent.

While 2018 retention quotas were met, changing the focus to [quality of talent](#) retained would better serve the force. Officer quality retention is especially acute as [an informal study of West Point graduates](#) by [The Atlantic](#) found that 82 percent of active-duty graduates "believed that half or more of the best are leaving." Furthermore, 65 percent of graduates surveyed "agreed that the exit rate of the best officers leads to a less competent general-officer corps," and 78 percent "agreed that it harms national security."

That study challenged the notion that the private sector opportunities encouraged people to leave the Army, finding that 82 percent of respondents who had left military service did so due to "frustration with military bureaucracy" (including the [Soviet-style central planning](#) personnel system); 90 percent believed many top officers would remain if the system was more meritocratic. The Army's talent management system desperately needs reform, and while progress began with the [2019 National Defense Authorization Act](#), [the first major update since the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act of 1980](#), nearly forty years of stagnation and the challenges of modern warfare require much more.

Increasing talent retention decreases the supply of new recruits required to maintain force numbers (and cultivating a more experienced force carries a range of other benefits). Our current challenge is that anything less than aggressively rebuilding the personnel system is tantamount to [shuffling the deck chairs on the Titanic](#), as strategic risks of failure increase daily in a multi-domain environment that demands increasing degrees of technological expertise. The growing acknowledgement of experts, like [retired Maj. Gen. Bob Scales](#), of the need for mature combat leaders capable of integrating emerging technology makes talent retention a national security priority. While there are countless recommendations for improving the system, change will require institutional commitment and accepting risk as the cost of growth. [Retired Lt. Gen. Barno](#) recommends tracking officer performance and

intellectual potential in tiers, and focusing branch managers on retaining top performers and shedding the bottom, which could be enabled by better integrating **technologies like data analytics**. Further, increasing the flexibility of career trajectories instead of giving in to the tyranny of key development billets and professional glide paths, while also allowing commanders *meaningful* hiring authorities, would be game changing.

4. Embrace Essentialism

In 2015, the US Army War College's *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession* revealed the impossibility of meeting mounting mandatory training requirements. It cited an earlier War College study, which found that "company commanders somehow have to fit 297 days of mandatory training requirements into 256 available training days." It also referenced a Department of the Army Inspector General report, which concluded that of sixteen locations inspected, at none of them were companies "able to complete all mandatory training and administrative tasks."

While Secretary of the Army Mark Esper is addressing these challenges at the institutional level with a host of **Army directives** eliminating unnecessary training requirements, tactical leaders must exploit liberated calendar space by ruthlessly eliminating inefficiencies at their level. As then Gen. James Mattis noted, our reliance on PowerPoint "**makes us stupid**"; too many meetings, despite **research showing they are ineffective 71 percent of time**, creates environments antithetical to deep work or decentralized execution. If our Army is bogged down making ineffective products for non-essential meetings in the face of unreasonable administrative requirements, expanding personnel numbers will only obscure the deeper issue.

Fixing these problems requires a system capable of integrating bottom-up feedback and strong leadership at the enterprise level to focus on priorities. Toyota's embrace of a concept called "kaizen" is a case study in tackling challenges of this scope. Kaizen is a continuous improvement system that helped the carmaker dominate the automotive market by using front-line worker experience to identify opportunities for improvement and passing them to management where they can be championed and implemented to create chain reactions of efficiency. The Army could leverage this bottom-up approach through crowdsourcing platforms that could complement and potentially amplify existing institutional efforts. However, this must be accompanied by willingness at the tactical level to kill omnipresent "priority clouds" by leveraging discipline in investing institutional resources—most notably, time.

#5 Train Efficiency

Despite the Army's investment in leadership development, **RAND research** finds that training is in "need of major change" due to the "lack of a true businesslike approach for making resource allocation decisions that achieve the best possible overall readiness benefit." The consequence is that officers lack fundamental management skills despite spending the majority of their careers in staff positions, responsible for tasks like overseeing processes, large projects, and budgets. This training gap is compounded by a culture that accepts inefficiency, and rarely evaluates commanders on metrics like soldier productivity, allowing antiquated practices to endure, which falsely amplify manpower needs.

The Army should expand the institutional role for tools and processes like Lean Six Sigma, **Agile development**, design thinking, project management training, and **building digital skills**. This could be achieved by prioritizing training these skills during existing professional military education opportunities and reinforcing gains by implementing commander evaluation metrics targeting productivity.

Final Thoughts

On top of the Army's failure to meet 2018 recruiting objectives there are other issues that compound the problem—rising obesity rates and soldier indiscipline concerns, for example. **Maj. Brian Shiozawa's** military obesity research found "even though they [obese service members] made up one-fifth of the population, obese soldiers used 46% of the medical appointments. . . . We are spending three to four times as much to maintain [them] than we get from [them]." Obesity-related medical expenses **cost the Department of Defense** \$1.5 billion and 650,000 work days each year. Recruit disciplinary issues, including what surveyed leaders described as a "**sense of entitlement**," drove a redesign of basic training and raises questions about professionalism and force readiness. These issues indicate our current end strength numbers may be artificially inflated, boosting pressure on recruiters to "**soften admissions**."

That the Army's recruitment strategy is not sustainable is already evident in a recent **Government Accountability Office** report that

showed the Army is unlikely to achieve its end strength goals until at least 2025. In this environment the Army must avoid pyrrhic victories like eventually hitting troop number targets while seeing capabilities *decrease*.

In 2008 Rahm Emanuel told the *Wall Street Journal*, “**You never want a serious crisis to go to waste.**” That’s what the Army now has. These failures provide an opportunity for confronting longstanding talent management practices and designing strategies for modern, multi-domain challenges. As international competition increases and warfare grows increasingly complex, failure to correct shortfalls from recruitment to retention and talent utilization accepts strategic risks with potentially fatal consequences.

Meeting those challenges requires a strategy that overturns engrained norms by integrating modern talent management strategies with force-multiplying technologies and a culture of efficiency. While these changes will require time and institutional commitment, the first step is taking ownership of the factors that we can control instead of allocating responsibility to those outside our sphere of influence—like the economy.

Capt. James Long is an Army infantry officer, MD5 Innovation Fellow, and experienced tactical innovator. He currently serves as an operations officer with United Nations Command Security Battalion–Joint Security Area. The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the United States Military Academy, Department of the Army, or Department of Defense.

Image credit: Maj. Edward Shank, US Army



14 COMMENTS



Greg on 02.15.19 at 10:26 am

Nailed it. As a 2009 YG Officer I absolutely agree with most of the points made here. And claiming that we’ve retained the best while promoting 85% to MAJ to just keep up with the demand signal is a great example of how we are driven by “industrial era” Human Resources processes.



Larry Rentz on 02.16.19 at 4:52 pm

Great points made here. While the fear of being overmatched in a conventional fight is valid, we style center our



capabilities around providing land forces to the Joint Force. We should not abandon that, but we should examine where to assume risk. As for our HR system, look at how we require the constant geographic moves within a career in order to be competitive. Additionally, we assume only Maneuver Officers can become 4 star generals (with a few exceptions).



Jason on 02.16.19 at 5:43 pm

🔗 They would be good points if it was intentional.... otherwise, it's just more slide of hand misdirection. Solid A- on crisis management communication.



John on 02.20.19 at 10:21 pm

As a former 12B30 from long ago I'm very glad I'm out. After exposure to this article and considering it is probably considered cutting edge policy wonk thought, I just see way too many "itsy-bitsy rules for itsy-bitsy people" as the reason for failure to retain critical personnel.



Charlie Dunlap on 04.30.19 at 11:44 am

I think this interesting essay is really more about retention and internal military personnel policies as opposed to what it takes to get young people to serve. I just don't think prospective recruits get that deep into military personnel policies.

I would suggest that there seems to be generational issues at play in terms of recruiting. A 2016 article in Task & Purpose made this point:

"According to research conducted before and after the Paris attacks by the Harvard Institute of Politics, a full 60% of millennials (adults between 18 and 29 years old) now support the use of ground troops in combating the Islamic State. Yet when asked if they would be willing to serve in the armed forces, only 15% conveyed any willingness at all to do so."

A 2017 article in Army Times made this point:

One is that "Generation Z," as it's been dubbed, is much less likely to want to leave home and see the world than others, Bowers said.

"Many of today's youth are not inclined to want to leave their family and friends," he said. "Family and friends, they oppose them joining the military service."

And a 2019 article, again in Army Times, reported this problem about recruiting:

"Because we never show soldiers off duty. And we never show soldiers having families," Muth said. "And I'll tell you, some of the misperceptions among the Z Generation are, 'Can we own a dog? Are we allowed to own a car? Do we always live in the barracks? Am I allowed to get married? Can I have children?' And we don't necessarily convey that."

Some of these things the military can address, but the reluctance of young people to leave their family and friends, as well as the idea that someone other than themselves ought to serve in combat situations are societal issues. In addition, it doesn't help that a brand new poll shows that while 61% of men believe women should register for the draft as they are required to do, 52% of women oppose having to do so. We need more people willing to serve.

In other words, although I do believe that the historically low unemployment rate does have a lot to do with recruiting difficulties, I also think we need to have a national conversation about military service in a democracy.

I would respectfully recommend this essay: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/25/military-service-warrior-caste-united-states/> as well as my own offering: <https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/can-we-talk-the-obligation-of-military-service/>



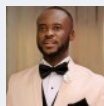
Steven J Blackburn on 07.08.19 at 4:29 am

It's good to see that at least one other person noticed that this article is intellectually dishonest. It presented a core element of its thesis (why the Army failed meet its recruitment goals in FY 2018) and then didn't even address it. It's an offensive bait-and-switch to get people's attention before advocating a lot of 'military service and public administration should be treated the same as private enterprise' idiotic nonsense. Half of the policy recommendations are common sense but difficult to implement, and the other half are radical and/or impossible. Incentivize performance has been done in public education with highly deleterious results, and doing the same in Army would be highly toxic. This article is trash.



YOUNG on 12.15.19 at 4:01 pm

Spot on. And thank you for the web links. They were interesting reads.



BAMIDELE JEGEDE on 07.16.19 at 10:50 pm

Great article. One other thing I will like to add is the unethical behaviors of recruiters. For example slow walking interested candidate especially officer candidate. I'm in that right now and I've been in this for 3 years.



Cole on 11.20.19 at 2:04 am

Sounds like you need a better recruiter.

Northiowa.goarmy.social



Tony on 11.17.19 at 2:40 am

Just make every man and women old/fit enough in USA to serve two years in the service of their choice. Like Israel does. This will keep our country on it's toes and better prepared for combat at any time. And have good leaders obviously in military branches and government. Fight to win not appease. Destroy with full force not halfway. Project tough leadership and intelligence for politics and warfare. Don't kiss ass, kick ass. Work with Nato and make sure Nato

and Allies have their shit together. Talk the talk but walk it. I could go on about pros and cons about 100 views, strategy, options, air/naval warfare, nuclear, biological and chemical deterrence and warfare. Ground forces etc. Stay strong stay ALIVE.



Tristan Kilman on 11.18.19 at 3:12 am

If I wasn't a felon I would join the army today but they won't let me



Caleb on 02.12.20 at 12:09 pm

Huh, people are figuring it out, no incentives for sending poor kids off to rich men's wars. It's funny that some demand this indentured service, send your own kids and quit trying to tell everyone how to think and what to do especially regarding war.



Akilu on 02.27.20 at 6:59 am

I think they should change the policy of being a green card holder, or exceptions should be considered to some persons who are eligible for green cards in less than a year. Asylees who has won their immigration cases should be considered



David on 03.26.20 at 4:04 pm

The US Army needs to fall in love with drones (at all levels), offensive cyber operations, refine sniper capabilities, Bring on two more Ranger Regiments, contract all Military Police functioned CONUS and Garrisons OCONUS, and drastically reduce Inspector General positions worldwide.

If the US Army is serious about retention stop cutting benefits.



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