

OPINION | AUGUST 26, 2010

The Military Should Mirror the Nation

America's Armed Forces are drawn from an increasingly narrow segment of society.

By GARY SCHMITT AND CHERYL MILLER

The nearly three million members of the U.S. Armed Forces have been at war for nearly a decade. While combat troops are being withdrawn from Iraq, surge forces are still deploying in Afghanistan and many soldiers are on their second or third tour of duty. Americans hold this service and sacrifice in high regard—but they do so increasingly from a distance. This is a threat to our country's civic ethic of equal sacrifice.

Few Americans today have a personal connection to the military. Veterans represent 9% of the total population (a number that continues to decline), and less than 1% serves in any of the military services, active duty or reserves.

Soldiers also come from a narrower segment of society—geographically and culturally—than ever before. Nearly half of all Army recruits come from military families. Southerners disproportionately populate all the branches, while the middle-class suburbs surrounding the nation's largest cities—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston and Philadelphia—produce relatively few service members despite having a large percentage of the nation's youth population.

The homogeneity of today's military is partly a product of self-selection, as the services seek out the most eager volunteers. But it is also a product of green-eyeshade budgeting and policy decisions by the armed services and government.

The all-volunteer force has served the nation exceedingly well for more than 35 years, and there is little constituency for bringing back the draft. But we should seriously consider the long-term implications that the current disparities in military service have for our civil-military relationship.

The American political system strives for national majorities over simple majorities, and that goal should be reflected in our military as well. Since its formal adoption in 1916, the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) was intended as such a national program. Uneasy with the prospect of a professional military elite trained at service academies, political leaders sought to diversify the officer corps through ROTC at colleges and universities. By virtue of their different education, these officers would infuse the military with a broader set of civilian values and help ensure that the military's leadership is more reflective of the entire country.

ROTC today produces more graduates than the service academies, but there are good reasons

to believe that it isn't fulfilling its original purpose. Much ink has been spilled over the fraught relations between the military and the Ivy League. But while the good military vs. the bad Ivies makes for good political theater, it isn't the whole story. While ROTC has been banned from many Ivy League campuses since the Vietnam War, the military also has drawn down its ROTC programs in the Northeast and in urban areas. ROTC has become increasingly Southern and rural.

In Virginia, for example, there are 7.8 million residents and 11 Army ROTC programs. New York City, home to over eight million people and America's largest university student population, has two Army ROTC programs. The entire Chicago metro area, with its 10 million residents, is covered by a single Army ROTC program, as is Detroit. Alabama, population 4.7 million, has 10.

To be sure, the current host schools often actively sought out their ROTC units, offering a variety of incentives, including newer facilities and larger training ranges. But that doesn't entirely account for the thinning out of ROTC in the big cities and the Northeast. Many in the military simply feel less comfortable outside their familiar red-state and land-grant enclaves—a result, in part, of the homogenization of the officer corps.

Current policy has been far too dismissive of the willingness of millions of young Americans to serve their country: One recent Army study argued against expanding ROTC to elite schools on the grounds that "the more prestigious the school, the less chance that anyone in the student's family had military experience. Since family military experience is linked to knowledge and propensity [to join ROTC], the higher the prestige of the university the more difficult to find those who would participate."

Such analysis can be self-fulfilling. If students lack a point of access to the military, such as a local ROTC program, they are unlikely to join. This is all the more reason why the prospect of joining the military should not be left to students' imaginations. To do otherwise is to deprive the military of top-quality officers at a time when it needs more people with talent in a wide variety of fields, from foreign languages to computer engineering.

At Columbia University two years ago, then-candidate Barack Obama noted about the South and Midwest that "every town has tons of young people who are serving in Iraq and Afghanistan." "That's not always the case in other parts of the country," he added, and it is "important for the president to say" that "if we are going into war, then all of us go, not just some."

He was making an important point. We are a nation at war and our military, including its leadership, should reflect that fact. That's healthy for our Armed Forces, and for the civic life of our country.

Mr. Schmitt and Ms. Miller are, respectively, director and program manager of the American Enterprise Institute's Program on Citizenship.

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