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Published on H-War (July, 2024)

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Last year marked the fiftieth anniversary of America’s all-volunteer force (AVF), and with it came waves of commentary on the state of US armed forces. Amid the symposiums and articles, historian William A. Taylor compiled this edited volume with a bold claim: “This book is the most comprehensive assessment of the AVF since its advent in 1973” (p. 2). His confidence is not misplaced. Taylor gathered an all-star cast of military historians, political scientists, economists, and serving officers in this multidisciplinary study of the AVF’s history, results, challenges, and implications. While the authors include several titans of their academic field, readers will be pleased to see subject experts like retired Major General Jeffrey Phillips and his chapter on the reserve components. It was also inspiring to encounter Titus Firmin, a PhD candidate whose chapter on the AVF’s socioeconomics challenges the conventional notion that the United States relies on its poor for defense. The issues raised by Phillips and Firmin are at the heart of this book: who serves and how, and what are the AVF’s broader civil-military implications?

There are ample reasons to discuss the AVF besides its anniversary. Taylor highlights one when he suggests the book’s central argument: “The AVF has been the most significant development in modern American military history” (p. 2). Bold as this claim appears, I think he is correct. The AVF has been at the heart of America’s wartime conduct, and the volunteer-technical military has become a model for many nations. This book also demonstrates that this topic is rich and urgent. It touches on both military-centric issues—professionalism, recruiting, morale, and strategy—and societal issues of class, economics, gender, and race. The authors of this book starkly emphasize how the system is under pressure. Retired Major General Dennis Laich argues that rising personnel costs have rendered the AVF inefficient, unfair, and unsustainable. Lawrence Wilkerson’s chapter reinforces its inefficiencies and suggests that an actual test of the selective service system would fail from widespread refusals to serve. Ad-
rian Lewis agrees. He paints a bleak picture of American culture, contending that the AVF has enabled Americans to become uninvolved and unfit for service, leaving the US unready for a major war.

*The All-Volunteer Force* illustrates how the United States arrived at this point, highlighting the system's virtues where appropriate. Three of this book's insights are particularly striking. First, this book makes painfully clear that the AVF did not solve all the problems of the draft and Vietnam. Indiscipline and morale problems remained, for instance, and the defense community overcame these problems through years of dedicated effort. Here, Jennifer Mittelstadt's chapter highlights the critical role played by expanding benefits and the army's promotion of professional values. Second, some of the long-term social benefits of the AVF are apparent, particularly in Beth Bailey and Kara Dixon Vuic's respective chapters on race and gender. Women and minorities have made clear strides and found tremendous opportunities in the AVF, often taking active-duty positions that directly translate into civilian work. Third, despite Americans' generally positive views of their military, a "civil-military gap" has emerged. Political scientist Marybeth Ulrich penned a whole chapter on this issue, arguing that military personnel have become isolated from the rest of society. This isolation removed the public's check on the decision for war in the early 2000s. For most Americans, it was someone else's war.

Readers seeking a balanced view may read significant portions of this book as a sustained attack against the AVF, particularly in the "Challenges" and "Implications" sections. There are exceptions, such as Mark Cancian's chapter on force structure. He points out, for instance, that the AVF and its relatively small size have encouraged technical innovation, although the price tag for new weapons has mushroomed. Taking a rational business standpoint, Cancian also manages to paint the expanded use of contractors in a positive light, suggesting that it has relieved those in uniform of many menial tasks. The "History" section at the beginning of the book also sheds light on the AVF's benefits; our country abandoned the draft for many reasons, after all. Michael Gibbs and Timothy Perri highlight the economic theories that underpinned the AVF's creation. Amy Rutenberg's chapter captures a core problem of the 1950s-era peacetime conscription: "the number of men available to draft grew while the army's need for numbers dropped" (p. 24). The unsatisfactory answer to this problem was "manpower channeling." In this practice, local officials branded select young men as "shirkers" and pushed them into the service while leaving the "patriotic" STEM field workers alone. Taylor may have also benefited from including another chapter: what was the armed services' view on the draft versus the AVF? Such an additional chapter might have shown how the army lost faith in the draft by 1968, as historian Robert Griffith suggested in his seminal work on the subject.

While the 2024 presidential candidates are unlikely to run on an anti-AVF platform, its critics are correct that the system is under pressure. Hence, understanding the alternatives is a worthwhile endeavor, and this book's readers will benefit in this regard. The most frightening possibility would be a drastic increase in privatization. Though the vast majority of contractors conducted themselves honorably in recent wars, any lurch toward a broader mercenary organization would raise questions of loyalty. Universal military training was another serious idea during the Truman administration, though it failed in Congress. Such an idea would also require a greatly expanded role for the reserve components or the creation of a whole new department. Pundits have also revived arguments for peacetime conscription as a check on military adventurism, though these arguments occasionally hint at a Cold War nostalgia. Still others have suggested a broader "national service obligation," which is a middle ground that might include other options like civil service. But
without careful legislation, obligatory service would create an overpowering Department of Defense and inevitably revive the problem of the 1950s: Who should serve when not all can? And how would a generation of American youth react to the looming threat of the peacetime draft? The AVF is a system that requires constant vigilance, and studies like this book need to continue provoking such questions.

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