

**Testimony before the National Commission
on Military, National, and Public Service**

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Military Service Hearing: Creating New Pipelines to Service and Fostering Critical Skills

Note: The ideas advanced in this paper reflect solely the conclusions of the authors, and should not be seen as representing the views of the Institute for Defense Analyses, nor those of its research sponsors.

Chairman Heck, Vice Chair Wada, Vice Chair Gearan, and Commissioners: Thank you for inviting me to testify today.

As members of this Commission appreciate, becoming a federal civilian, and participating in the uniformed ranks of our military (active and Reserve Component), comprise two of the most significant opportunities for public service. Each year, the federal civil service appoints 160,000 or so new members, and 250,000 individuals join the four military services—171,000 on active duty, 79,000 accepting the responsibilities of Reserve Component assignment.¹

These are magnificent opportunities—but they are not uniformly appreciated or easily reached by all Americans.

The decentralized federal civil service hiring process can be bewildering and difficult for applicants, too slow to make decisions. It's my understanding that the current administration is considering reform proposals, and I would urge the Commission to encourage constructive initiatives. Those could include changing the basic construct, from one that waits for applicants to appear vice one that actively recruits for the talent it needs (on a national basis), and that achieves the social objectives that complicate hiring decisions through incentives and evaluation of the results produced, vice ex ante regulatory controls.

The military services do recruit on a national basis, and have long used incentives to help produce the results desired. But in parts of the country, the decision to enlist is greeted skeptically by those advising young Americans. The public's admiration for the military² — consistent over the last generation—stands in sharp contrast to the advice that many parents and counselors explicitly and implicitly provide: It's an opportunity for somebody else.³

¹ 161,000 civil servants appointed in FY2017--see OPM's FedScope Accessions Cube (FY 2011 - FY 2017). <https://www.opm.gov/data/index.aspx>. Sum includes AC, New Hire Competitive Service Appointments; AD, New Hire, Excepted Service Appointments; and AE, New Hire, Senior Executive Service Appointments. Military accessions are for FY2018--see Department of Defense News Release NR-324-18. *Department of Defense Announces Fiscal Year 2018 Recruiting and Retention Numbers – End of Year Report*. 15 November 2018. <https://dod.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/1691314/department-of-defense-announces-fiscal-year-2018-recruiting-and-retention-numbe/>.

² 2019 Gallup poll on the subject of Military and National Defense shows during the June 1-13, 2018 period, 74% of respondents expressed a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the American military. That trend has remained steady over the past seven years. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1666/military-national-defense.aspx>. The Pew Research Center cites a similarly favorable impression, with 80% of respondents professing a great deal or fair amount of confidence in the military – as opposed to a scant 25% who feel the same levels of confidence in their elected officials. Pew Research Center, April 2018, *The Public, the Political System and American Democracy*. <https://www.people-press.org/2018/04/26/1-democracy-and-government-the-u-s-political-system-elected-officials-and-governmental-institutions/>. p. 16.

³ McIntyre, Jamie. "Pentagon complains about the 1,100 US high schools that ban military recruiters." *Washington Examiner* 16 December 2018. <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/pentagon-complains-about-the-1-100-us-high-schools-that-ban-military-recruiters>.

At the risk of indulging in regional stereotypes, this skepticism may help explain the unfortunate geographic variance in the military recruit pipeline. For some time now, relative to the 18-24 year old population, the military services draw proportionately fewer new members from the northeast and upper midwest, balanced by more from the south and mountain west.⁴

Such skepticism can sometimes directly restrict the information young Americans receive about military opportunities. Some school jurisdictions welcome the administration of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), which is used to match enlisted recruits with specialties, and therefore helps inform students about their possibilities, but others are reluctant to accept the Department of Defense's offer. It might help acceptance if the ASVAB were structured so it could be used for career advice generally (the US Aptitude Diagnostic—USA Diagnostic?). And a mechanism offering it to those beyond high school, but seeking better career opportunities, would be consistent with DoD's recent repositioning the ASVAB as part of a Career Exploration Program. The Commission's endorsement of such testing as a source of career advice, including exploration of military options, would be most helpful.

Young Americans themselves may be limiting their opportunities by the choices they make. Passing a physical examination is a key element of the recruiting process. The national obesity epidemic is making recruiting substantially more difficult. Likewise, the military properly precludes from service those whose actions cast doubt on their ability to handle the responsibilities with which our country would entrust them. The Commission speaking to the need for physical fitness, and the consequences of misconduct, would be of great public value, in my judgment.

Some young Americans may be deterred from government service, believing it requires a career commitment. For the military in particular, the earlier requirement that you had to serve twenty years to earn retirement may have helped create that impression. But Congress recently revised the retirement system to offer vesting upon completion of two years of service. Even under the earlier regime, most did not serve until retirement.

The military differs from civil service in the difficulty of moving back and forth between active duty and working in the private sector. While the military does recruit a small number of prior-service enlisted personnel, and provides some opportunity for Reserve Component officers to volunteer for active duty mid-career, the Department has yet to embrace enthusiastically the concept advanced in the early 2000s of a "continuum of service". That concept sought to capitalize on the benefits of drawing specialized personnel from the civil sector (long the practice for the professions-- clinicians, lawyers and clergy). Indeed, the concept envisaged several moves back and forth, during which the military member would refresh his or her skills outside the military, in those areas where it's the private sector that

⁴ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, Personnel and Readiness. *Population Representation in the Military Services: Fiscal Year 2017 Summary Report*. Published in 2018. Accessed April 24, 2019. <http://www.cna.org/research/pop-rep>. p. 18.

creates much of the nation's technical expertise. Cyber is frequently cited as a possibility, but a range of other skills could be envisaged—e.g., program management, software development, language and cultural expertise. For officers, Congress has recently given the Department the authority it needs to appoint at advanced grades, which would facilitate the continuum of service construct, if the Department is willing to use it. And for enlisted personnel, it already possesses the latitude to create alternatives should it choose to do so.

There are three great advantages of adopting a “continuum of service” philosophy for the military. First, if various surveys are to be believed⁵, this might improve the appeal of military service to younger Americans, who are interested in trying a variety of options, rather than picking just one and pursuing it for a career. Second, the future military may need more personnel in the middle years of experience because of the technical nature of operations (a “Michelin man” profile), versus the pyramid shape the military now assumes. Only by drawing from the private sector could such a distribution be achieved. Third, it could advantage recruiting for the Reserve Components, which provide so much of our contemporary capability, allowing those whose personal circumstances temporarily preclude serving to withdraw and return at a later date.

While the civil service is more accepting of movement to and from the private sector, it could be yet more welcoming. Some position announcements (e.g., for the Senior Executive Service) restrict consideration to those who are already civil servants, and the proliferation of civil service authorities can make it challenging to enter an agency governed under a different system. Put differently, the concept of a continuum of service ought well apply to our government as a whole.

Focusing on the continuum of service also acknowledges that the military veteran can bring important skills back to the private sector. It reinforces the Department's recent initiative encouraging active duty personnel to begin thinking about their return to civil life early in their service, as part of a revamped Transition Assistance Program. One of the enduring challenges for military personnel is translating the skills they acquire so they can be recognized by the private sector, especially if certificates of competence or licenses are required. That is my final plea, that the Commission help take on this issue, as yet another way to lessen the civil-military divide. It is the least our country can do, I believe, for those who have devoted several years of their lives to protecting our interests in a dangerous and difficult world.

⁵ See Gallup poll on Millennials: The Job-Hopping Generation: <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/231587/millennials-job-hopping-generation.aspx>. *Forbes* agrees: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sarahlandrum/2017/11/10/millennials-arent-afraid-to-change-jobs-and-heres-why/#7c2fef8819a5>.