

# Manning the Army of 2028: Recruitment Modernization

by Major Bradley Cooper, U.S. Army, and Michael Wang

PUBLISHED BY THE INSTITUTE OF LAND WARFARE  
AT THE ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY



MARCH 2019

*It is incumbent on us to reconnect with America in such a way that the youth of America find service in the Army important, meaningful, satisfying, rewarding, and productive.*

SMA Robert E. Hall  
ARMY, October 1999<sup>1</sup>

The U.S. Army's senior leadership has repeatedly emphasized the need to recruit and retain "high quality, physically fit, mentally tough Soldiers who can deploy, fight, and win decisively on any future battlefield."<sup>2</sup> To do so, **the Army needs to preserve its competitive edge over the nation's adversaries by modernizing personnel policies with recruiting and retention programs that maintain readiness and develop future leaders.**

After more than 17 years of low-intensity operations in the Middle East, the Department of Defense (DoD) is focusing on optimizing for high-end conflict with near-peer competitors. The Army has established a new major subordinate command—Futures Command—to streamline the development and acquisition of new capabilities. That said, at its core, the Army is a people-centric organization whose strength is not measured in platforms like tanks, ships and aircraft, but in flexible Soldiers who can adapt to changing circumstances.

## ■ Challenges on the Personnel Front

Shifting demographic, economic and social factors have the potential to impede the Army's recruiting efforts. As an All-Volunteer Force, incentives are necessary to attract and retain qualified people to serve in sufficient numbers. Military service rates tend to spike in times of economic hardship, but the current strong economy makes civilian career paths increasingly attractive. A tightening labor market has led to a high demand for workers, consequently creating a challenging environment for military recruiters.

## ISSUE

The Soldier-centric U.S. Army needs to modernize its personnel recruitment policies to complement its technological modernization efforts.

## SPOTLIGHT SCOPE

- Describes the complex strategic environment in which Soldiers will operate in 2028;
- Discusses the impact of limited military eligibility of American youth, ages 17–24;
- Identifies shortfalls caused by current personnel policies; and
- Explores innovative ideas to recruit the next generation of Soldiers.

## INSIGHTS

- Maintaining the quality of the All-Volunteer Force is a *national* priority.
- The Army is transforming how it finds, recruits and retains talented Soldiers from the shrinking pool of young Americans who meet basic military standards.
- Educating the American public on the importance and benefits of military service is key to attracting the best talent for the Army.
- Innovative personnel policies are as critical as acquisition reform in building the force of 2028.

<sup>1</sup> SMA Robert E. Hall, "The Noncommissioned Officer Corps: Meeting the Army's Challenge," *ARMY*, October 1999, 36.

<sup>2</sup> Mark A. Milley and Mark T. Esper, "The Army Vision 2017," 1, [https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/vision/the\\_army\\_vision.pdf](https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/vision/the_army_vision.pdf).

It is also important to note that there is an overall decline in the size of the population eligible to serve in the military; while population is growing overall, the size of the population aged 17–24, i.e., the age most eligible for military recruitment, is declining.

Of the current population in that range, 71 percent are unable to meet the physical, educational and moral standards for military service.<sup>3</sup> Only 29 percent are eligible to join without requiring a waiver, compared to approximately 50 percent during World War II.<sup>4</sup> By 2025, the number of enlistment-eligible candidates will drop to 9.9 million compared to 10.3 million in 2015. This decline means that additional incentives will be needed to sustain recruitment rates—and to keep standards from slipping.

## ■ Educating the American Public

Despite an increasingly popular view of the military, a 2017 Harvard Institute of Politics study found that 85 percent of respondents “won’t or probably won’t serve” in the military.<sup>5</sup> Approximately seven percent of the total population has served in the military, creating a widening civil-military divide.<sup>6</sup> This is important, as people who have had more personal interaction with servicemembers are more likely to join.

A lower overall propensity to join the military means that a greater burden is placed on the segment of the population that does choose to serve. A majority of those in the military today have family who have served. In a 2016 survey, 45 percent of active duty and 57 percent of veterans had a parent who had also served,<sup>7</sup> while 53 percent of respondents had two or more immediate family members who had served. War has become a family affair.

Another factor at play is that parents and other influencers will likely attempt to dissuade interested individuals from joining the military if they perceive the risks to outweigh the benefits. Part of what shapes this perception is popular media, which emphasizes the difficulties of combat and tends to display the majority of veterans as suffering from behavioral health issues.<sup>8</sup>



Recruiters from the Oklahoma City Battalion gathered with high school students from Grant and Southeast Oklahoma City High Schools at Fort Sill for an education event. The event, hosted by Fort Sill, brought the students together with school administrators and recruiters from across the state to highlight Army life. The students participated in events such as vehicle operation, field artillery procedures and call-for-fire (U.S. Army photo by Amber Osei, U.S. Army Recruiting Battalion–Oklahoma City).

## HISTORY REPEATING ITSELF?

President Truman, in his Health Message to Congress on 19 November 1945, reported that the Selective Service System had brought the widespread physical and mental incapacity among the young people of the nation “forcibly to our attention in terms which all of us can understand.”

“As of April 1, 1945,” the President stated, “nearly 5,000,000 male registrants between the ages of 18 and 37 had been examined and classified as unfit for military service. The number of those rejected for military service was about 30 per cent of those examined.”

<sup>3</sup> John Grady, “Panel: Pentagon Facing Future Recruiting Challenge Due to Lack of Candidates,” *USNI News*, 12 October 2017, <https://news.usni.org/2017/10/12/panel-pentagon-facing-future-recruiting-challenge-due-lack-candidates>.

<sup>4</sup> John Michaels, “Physically fit recruits for Army are hard to find. Especially in these states,” *USA Today*, 10 January 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/01/10/physically-fit-recruits-army-hard-find-especially-these-states/1016030001>.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Bump, “Millennials embrace a long-standing tradition: Letting someone else fight their wars,” *The Washington Post*, 10 December 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/12/10/millennials-embrace-a-long-standing-tradition-letting-someone-else-fight-their-wars>.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “Veteran Population Projections 2017–2037,” 2016, [https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/Demographics/New\\_Vetpop\\_Model/Vetpop\\_Infographic\\_Final31.pdf](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/Demographics/New_Vetpop_Model/Vetpop_Infographic_Final31.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Amy Schafer, “Generations of War: The Rise of the Warrior Caste and the All-Volunteer Force,” Center for a New American Security, 8 May 2017, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/generations-of-war>.

<sup>8</sup> Terri Tanielian, Caroline Batka and Lisa S. Meredith, “The Changing Landscape for Veterans’ Mental Health Care,” RAND Corporation, 2017, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB9981z2.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9981z2.html).



The Army adjusted its 2018 recruitment goal from 80,000 to 76,500 Soldiers after first quarter projections indicated that gaining 80,000 new Soldiers would cause the Army to exceed its authorized end-strength by 4,000. This projection was based on decreased attrition (disability separations, separations and officer separations) and a less-than-projected increase in authorized endstrength (which was the basis for the original goal of 80,000).<sup>9</sup>

While high rates of retention allow the Army to keep critical leaders and to save money by avoiding constantly retraining another cohort of recruits, overreliance on retention to maintain current end-strength potentially jeopardizes the health of tomorrow's force. With the majority of the recruiting pool being millennials (1983–2001) and generation Z (2002–present), the Army is revamping recruiting efforts to reach out and pull these two generations into its ranks. Without enough initial recruits, the Army will have a resultant smaller pool from which to draw its mid-level leaders in the future.

## ■ Why Personnel Modernization?

Competition among the great powers is reshaping the threat environment.<sup>10</sup> The emerging battlefield presents the military with an array of challenges unlike any it has faced during the nearly two decades of conflict in the Middle East. Near-peer competitors are aiming the bulk of their efforts at conducting anti-access area denial toward the United States and U.S. modernization advancements.

**Cultivating a lethal, agile force requires more than just new technologies and posture changes; it depends on the ability of warfighters to integrate new capabilities, adapt new approaches and change business practices.**<sup>11</sup> In the past, the Army naturally focused on the land domain; however, adversaries' use of multiple domains requires the Army to modernize how it intends to operate in this strategic security environment as described in the Multi-Domain Operations operational concept.<sup>12</sup> New technologies such as cyber and space are unhampered by geography and compress the battle space, including threats, to traditionally safe rear areas.

Strategic competitors seek asymmetric advantages by blurring the boundaries of conventional conflict to test the United States and its allies. The information space is being weaponized, as hostile entities challenge basic facts



Major Lakishia M. Simmons, San Francisco Medical Recruiting Station officer-in-charge, speaks with an attendee of the American Psychological Association 2018 Convention at the Moscone Center in San Francisco, California, on 9 August 2018. Simmons was on hand with her team to explain the benefits and opportunities of a career in Army Medicine (U.S. Army Photo by Andrew Lynch).

<sup>9</sup> Lolita C. Baldor, "Army lowers 2017 recruiting goal; more soldiers staying on," *The Seattle Times*, 20 April 2018, <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation-politics/army-wont-meet-recruiting-mission-lowers-2017-goal>.

<sup>10</sup> Jim Mattis, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy," 5, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Sydney J. Freedberg, Jr., "DoD CIO Says Spectrum May Become Warfighting Domain," *Breaking Defense*, 9 December 2015, <https://breakingdefense.com/2015/12/dod-cio-says-spectrum-may-become-warfighting-domain>.

to sow doubt and confusion within the public and the military. In the context of such uncertainty, the Army needs to emphasize innovation and versatility. **While technology is important in addressing these challenges, the ultimate solution is combining technological advances and people with the right skills, in the right place, at the right time.**

## Getting to the Army of 2028—People are the Centerpiece

The Army and DoD have continually drawn recruits from just a few regions, primarily the South (44 percent of military recruits are from Georgia, South Carolina and Texas).<sup>13</sup> This is because state and local policies are generally more favorable to the military due to a preponderance of military communities in that region. There are already local efforts to present military service opportunities to youths in local communities, such as Gaming and Fitness conventions or the Meet Your Army program.

Opportunities also exist to utilize 21st century tools like social media to reach an even wider audience.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, the Army is expanding its engagement with community leaders to improve the public's understanding of its military. This military and civilian partnership is key because informed citizens understand the importance of voluntary national service.

In the past, recruiting efforts would be focused on key areas with a high number of veterans, lower college attendance and limited economic opportunities—all factors that could make service more attractive to a high school graduate. The recruiting effort is now expanding to reach segments of the population that have had little exposure to the military. The Army is looking to 22 major population centers—Pittsburgh, Orlando, New York City, Sacramento, Atlanta, Kansas City, Chicago, Miami, Houston, Boston, Cleveland, San Francisco, Phoenix, Dallas, Seattle, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Oklahoma City, Denver, Shreveport, Los Angeles and St. Louis—as part of initiative called *Focus 22*, the purpose of which is to reach more people in the 17–24 age range.<sup>16</sup>

An Army that is visible across the nation has access to a greater pool of human capital (including potential recruits with specialized skills, e.g., cyber, in places like Silicon Valley) and is more representative of the general population.



The Puerto Rico National Guard (PRNG) Recruiting and Retention Command (Area 5) organized an orientation event focused on senior high school students hosted by A Company, 1st Battalion, 65th Infantry at the Sergeant First Class Adolfo Rivera Ortiz Readiness Center in the municipality of Aibonito, 6 December 2018 (U.S. Army photo by First Sergeant Waldemar Rivera, 113th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment).

---

*We think the best representation of the United States of America is to recruit from the entire nation.*

—SMA Daniel A. Dailey<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Sean Braswell, “Why the US military is so Southern,” *Ozy*, 20 November 2016, <https://www.ozy.com/acumen/why-the-us-military-is-so-southern/72100>.

<sup>14</sup> Ben Watson, “Here’s What Concerns the General in Charge of Recruiting America’s Future Army,” *DefenseOne*, 12 October 2017, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2017/10/heres-what-concerns-general-charge-recruiting-americas-future-army/141701>.

<sup>15</sup> C. Todd Lopez, “Dailey calls for recruiting from ‘entire nation,’ improved training opportunities,” *Army News*, 17 February 2017, [https://www.army.mil/article/182464/dailey\\_calls\\_for\\_recruiting\\_from\\_entire\\_nation\\_improved\\_training\\_opportunities](https://www.army.mil/article/182464/dailey_calls_for_recruiting_from_entire_nation_improved_training_opportunities).

<sup>16</sup> Meghann Myers, “4-star: The Army may be pushing to recruit from some blue-voting cities, but it’s not political,” *Army Times*, 8 January 2019, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/01/08/4-star-the-army-may-be-pushing-to-recruit-from-some-blue-voting-cities-but-its-not-political>.

## RECRUITING—COMING TO A CITY NEAR YOU!



### ■ Recruitment Options

To achieve this, the Army is pursuing policy initiatives that attract the best and the brightest from the private sector by providing them with pathways through which they can contribute. Having the ability to enter the military at a rank commensurate with their education and experience is an example of a potential policy change that should attract more people with the skill sets needed by the Army. Creating greater flexibility for a Soldier to move between components (e.g., active to reserve) is another example of an adjustment that would allow Soldiers to tailor the method of their service to their life circumstances (as recommended by the National Commission on the Future of the Army). This is particularly important for the Army Reserve, which faces a severe shortage in mid-grade leaders.<sup>17</sup>

Another option includes modifying the length of service requirement. Expanding two-year enlistment opportunities could be the way to attract a technical specialist who desires to serve but is dissuaded by a full four-year enlistment. Two-year enlistments could function as a de facto trial period that would translate into reenlistments as Soldiers experience the value of service.<sup>18</sup>

### ■ Development and Short Breaks

Leadership development bolsters the resiliency of the Army. It is “the key element of investment that improves the Army’s ability to adapt to unforeseen

### ADDITIONAL RECRUITING INCENTIVES

- Partnership for Youth Success
  - This program gives a recruit the opportunity to receive a hiring preference following military service.
- Buddy Team Enlistment Option
  - Buddy Program allows a recruit and up to five friends to enlist and train in the Army together.
- Special Pay for Special Duties and Skills
  - Doctors, pilots and foreign language proficiency pay

### CURRENT NON-CONSCRIPTION MILITARY SERVICE LAW

- 18 years of age (17 years of age with parental consent)
- Maximum Enlistment Age:
  - Army: 42      – Navy: 34
  - Air Force: 27      – Marines: 28
- Service Obligation (initial)
  - Army: 2 yrs      – Navy: 2 yrs
  - Air Force: 4 yrs      – Marines: 4 yrs

<sup>17</sup> Chris Govekar, “The Army Reserve Simply Doesn’t Have Enough People Willing to Fill Command Slots,” *Task and Purpose*, 23 April 2018, <https://taskandpurpose.com/army-reserve-command-slots-shortage>.

<sup>18</sup> Meg Trucano et al., “Foreign Military Strategies to Recruit and Retain Women,” Insight Policy Research, March 2017, <https://dacowits.defense.gov/Portals/48/Documents/General%20Documents/RFI%20Docs/March2017/Insight%20RFI%20203.pdf?ver=2017-03-17-113845-857>.



future demands.”<sup>19</sup> While platforms and weapon systems can change rapidly, leadership—people of character, integrity and adaptability—remains the foundation of the Army. Good leadership cannot be reconstituted abruptly; it requires sustained cultivation. Reinvigorating professional military education to address modern challenges is a priority highlighted in both the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act and the 2018 National Defense Strategy.

## ■ The Way Ahead

The Army began Fiscal Year 2019 on 1 October 2018 with a recruiting goal of 72,500. It is offering up to \$40,000 in bonuses, two-year enlistments, student loan repayment, choice of duty station or a tailored contract in order to attract new recruits and achieve its target numbers in the coming year.<sup>20, 21</sup>

The Army is relying more on social media platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, to reach the generation that is about to graduate. Hoping to appeal to young minds, it recently launched the #WarriorsWanted campaign, which features 30-second clips focused on the professional combat and non-combat jobs that the Army has to offer.<sup>22</sup> In October 2018, it released a video in which the Sergeant Major of the Army implores all of those serving to share their reasons for enlisting.<sup>23</sup> Soldiers telling their stories and their personal reasons for serving are a powerful recruitment tool. The Army’s senior leadership have charged *all* Soldiers as “recruiters” to raise awareness of the Army and to encourage young Americans and their influencers to consider service in the Army.

The Army can learn from the private sector as it refines its recruitment strategy, just as the corporate world has mastered the technologies of appealing to generation Z before they graduate. Human Resource officials immerse themselves in these students’ worlds by making everything accessible through their mobile devices. They understand sets of behaviors, communication preferences, spending habits, brand affinities and loyalties—and they use all of this knowledge to convince young adults that they are on the same team, on their side and there to help them.<sup>24</sup> The Army can use this same strategy—communicating on digital platforms—to connect with today’s youth.



*Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps cadets from Northern Arizona University on their team ruck march at the 2018 regional ROTC Ranger Challenge at Fort Bliss, Texas, 13 October (U.S. Army photo by David Poe).*

<sup>19</sup> NCFA, 48.

<sup>20</sup> Meghann Myers, “The Army is supposed to be growing, but this year, it didn’t at all,” *Army Times*, 21 September 2018, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2018/09/21/the-army-is-supposed-to-be-growing-but-this-year-it-didnt-at-all>.

<sup>21</sup> “Benefits,” U.S. Army, 13 August 2018, <https://www.goarmy.com/benefits/additional-incentives.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew Cox, “Army Launches New ‘Warriors Wanted’ Campaign Aimed at Generation Z,” *Military.com*, 19 October 2018, <https://www.military.com/dodbuzz/2018/10/19/army-launches-new-warriors-wanted-campaign-aimed-generation-z.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Eric Milzarski, “5 things soldiers should expect, now that we’re all recruiters,” *We Are the Mighty*, 19 October 2018, <https://www.wearethemighty.com/military-culture/we-are-all-recruiters-now>.

<sup>24</sup> Forbes Agency Council, “Need To Reach Gen Z? Here’s How to Market to A Younger Demographic,” *Forbes*, 29 March 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2018/03/29/need-to-reach-gen-z-heres-how-to-market-to-a-younger-demographic>.

## ■ Conclusion

The Army is seeking to grow in the coming years while undergoing the most significant accessions restructuring it has seen in nearly half a century. It is reforming the Accessions Enterprise to more effectively and efficiently attract qualified and talented recruits and officer candidates who can meet Army requirements and so support its operational mission.

As the United States Army approaches the third decade of the 21st century, it is clear to its senior leadership that readiness of both the current and future force is paramount. The past decade and a half of war have consumed Army current force readiness; a concurrent lack of timely, predictable and adequate funding have reduced the focus on keeping the force modernized for the future.

As the Army proceeds with modernization, technology alone will not provide the critical edge to defeat adversaries. Innovative personnel policies are as critical as weapon system modernization to achieve the U.S. Army Vision of 2028. Broad talent management and leader development themes are important to ensuring the readiness of the Army. Overreliance on legacy rules and regulations hampers the ability of the Army to become more adaptable, innovative and lethal.

Sustaining the quality of the All-Volunteer Force is a national priority; the alternatives—accepting a less well-educated, less fit (morally or physically) or less-motivated force, or returning to short-term compulsory service—will not result in the Army that the nation requires, now or in the future.<sup>25</sup>



*Major Bradley Cooper is currently serving as the Army Fellow at AUSA. He has over 16 years of experience as an Army Logistician. He holds a Master's in Business from the University of Phoenix.*

*Michael Wang has a Master's in International Economics from the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. He wrote this paper while serving as National Security Analyst at AUSA.*



Lieutenant Colonel Scott Morley (left), commander, Phoenix Recruiting Battalion, administers the oath of enlistment to 35 future Soldiers from the battalion, 18 November 2018 at State Farm Stadium in Glendale, Arizona (Photo by Alun Thomas, USAREC Public Affairs).

The Association of the United States Army is a private, non-profit educational organization that supports America's Army—Regular Army, Army National Guard, Army Reserve, retired Soldiers, government civilians, wounded warriors, veterans, concerned citizens and family members.

Interested in becoming a member of AUSA? See the benefits of membership and join online at:

**[www.ausa.org/membership](http://www.ausa.org/membership)**

Reproduction and distribution of this report, in whole or in part, with appropriate acknowledgment of the source, are encouraged.

<sup>25</sup> National Commission on the Future of Army: Report to the President and the Congress of the United States, 28 January 2016, <https://fas.org/man/eprint/ncfa.pdf>.



**THE INSTITUTE OF LAND WARFARE**  
AT THE ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY