
Defense Report

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The All-Volunteer Force—How Much Does It Really Cost?

The General Accounting Office, Congress' watchdog over the executive departments, has just issued a report claiming the All-Volunteer concept, in operation in the U.S. Armed Forces since 1971, has cost the American taxpayers \$18 billion in additional expense.

The report attributes the full cost of military pay raises, increases in advertising budgets, expenditures for enlistment incentives, the cost of better barracks and family housing and even some cost avoidance under the food stamp program directly to the operation of the All-Volunteer force. The Defense Department correctly attempted to rebut some of the expenses charged to the new manpower concept but perhaps did not make its rebuttal strong enough.

One of the biggest costs attributed to the All-Volunteer force by the GAO is that which began with a major pay raise for junior enlisted personnel and officers in 1971 and has pushed annual personnel costs upward ever since. The point at issue here is whether that raise was passed by Congress solely to implement the volunteer force or reflected a real need to bring military pay into line with comparable civilian compensation, regardless of whether the pay would be going to volunteers or to draftees. Members of Congress who were concerned with fair treatment for the armed forces voted for the raise as a matter of equity. Others may have voted for it solely because it might help make the volunteer force work but, in any case, the raise was long overdue.

The GAO report implies that if the United States had not shifted to a volunteer force thousands of troops would still be living in ramshackle "temporary" World War II barracks with sagging floors and faulty plumbing. This reasoning gives neither the Defense Department or the Congress credit for seeing the need to modernize troop housing and to provide better family housing for eligible career personnel. New barracks would have been built for draftees and new family housing would have been constructed for the career NCO's and officers who would have been around no matter what the source of the more junior personnel might have been.

And as far as recruiting costs and enlistment bonuses are concerned the GAO apparently chose to forget that even with an operative draft the Army still sought a substantial number of volunteer enlistments, particularly for jobs that required long periods of training and could not be filled by short-term draftees.

The GAO admits the report does nothing to settle the question of whether a volunteer force is better than a conscripted one. It does even less than that. Congress, the military establishment and the American Public must be a little bewildered by it.