

PART

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Mission Critical

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Military Recruiting Is Facing a Perfect Storm

America without her soldiers would be like God without His angels.
—Claudia Pemberton

The military is no longer, and will never again be, the place of last resort for troubled and low-IQ members of our society. Military service has become an upwardly mobile career choice for the most gifted, talented, and intelligent among us.

Members of the military receive consistent pay raises, enlistment and retention bonuses, recession-proof job security, college tuition, guaranteed retirement income, and incredible benefits including paid housing, free health care, training, and paid education. They also have access to facilities on military bases that are unavailable to most civilians.

From a purely economic standpoint, joining the military is a smart financial move that gives a fortunate few access to a lifestyle and standard of living far above that of most civilians.

Yet deteriorating attention spans have made it difficult to get prospects to sit still long enough to learn about this incredible career opportunity. Meanwhile, fewer young Americans are interested in or even aware of the benefits afforded by a military career.¹

Studies suggest that the majority of those who enlist and serve come from a family in which a parent or sibling is also in the military.² Yet the size of the active-duty US military is at its lowest level in more than 50 years.³ With this, fewer young people than ever before have family members who are in the military or are learning about military life from influential mentors.

Worse, a high percentage of active-duty military members come from just five states—mostly the Southeast—with the Southern states consistently contributing the highest number of new recruits as a proportion of the population.⁴

Despite the incredible career opportunities available in the modern armed forces, military recruiters are increasingly operating in an America where there is a divide between the civilian and military classes.⁵

The pool of prospects with family or geographic associations to military service is steadily evaporating.⁶ With increasing base closures and consolidations, fewer cities have a large military presence. This means young people are less likely to be exposed to military personnel beyond those they see online and in the media.

The connection between civilians and the military is eroding,⁷ making it much more difficult for recruiters to engage prospects and their parents. “We speak a different language. We are governed by a separate set of norms and dogma. We even live apart from each other,” says Phillip Carter of the nonpartisan think tank the Military, Veterans and Society Program at the Center for a New

American Security. He describes America's sprawling military bases as our "most exclusive gated communities."

This gap has extended to public schools and universities. Increasingly, faculty are ostracizing the military and its recruiters, either overtly or in more nuanced ways. These institutions, despite legal obligations to provide access, make it difficult for military recruiters to engage students, using either passive roadblocks or outright hostility to create de facto no-go zones.

Though the military is among the most trusted and revered American institutions,⁸ in the words of Lieutenant Colonel Remi M. Hajjar, a professor at West Point, "Many Americans consider the military a bit like a guard dog. They are very thankful for the protection, but they probably wouldn't want to have it as a neighbor. And they certainly are not going to influence or inspire their own kids to join that pack of Rottweilers to protect America."

Qualification Standards Continue to Tighten

Meanwhile, as the available talent pool shrinks in the midst of this perfect storm, the military apparatus continues to tighten qualification standards, and politicians play games that strain recruiting budgets.

Still, even when recruiters identify qualified prospects who have a propensity for joining the military, they face another, daunting gauntlet. The prospects in this new generation have more power—more information, more distractions, more options, more at stake, and more control over their future—than at any time in history.

With so many options available for talented people, they can afford to wait for "something better to come along." This, combined with extreme information overload, creates fear and insecurity that often leaves prospects and their parents clinging to the status quo. Doing nothing, making no choice at all, is often their preferred course of action.

It's no wonder so many recruiters are struggling. It's no wonder that recruiting leaders are frustrated and more stressed out than ever. And it's not surprising that most recruiting units are staring down the barrel at 50 percent or more of their recruiters consistently missing mission.

This perfect storm of obstacles creates an existential threat to the strength and readiness of the greatest fighting force ever assembled on earth and may weaken its ability to protect our democracy.

If we've lost the benefit of historical family ties to military service, if our education system is a hindrance, if the gap between civilian society and the military is growing, and if young people have more options, feel less inclined to serve, and are ill informed on the benefits of military service—then our only hope lies with our military recruiters and their ability to close the gap.

This is why it is imperative that we arm our recruiters and NCOICs with the skills they need to win the war for talent in this challenging environment.