

Recent newsletters for obvious reasons have addressed the education component of Step Forward America focusing on civics education and current affairs. But right now, for reasons that are equally concerning, let's look at the service component again and specifically military service.

David Brooks wrote an opinion piece in the January 17th *New York Times* entitled "Hegseth Is the Secretary of Defense We Deserve." Hmmm! Doesn't sound like David Brooks. But bear with me.

Mr. Brooks noted that "Recent American defense strategy has been based on the optimistic assumption that we will have to fight only one war at a time. But the closer cooperation between China, Russia, Iran and North Korea...[means] we may have to fight three or four regional wars simultaneously." He went on to quote a 2023 RAND Corporation report on U.S. military "power and influence" stating that "The tasks that the nation expects its military forces and other elements of national power to do internationally exceed the means that are available to accomplish those tasks." With that background, Mr Brooks discussed the Congressional confirmation hearing for Mr. Hegseth to become our Secretary of Defense. One would assume that the questioning would focus on our defense strategy and posture, our readiness for conflict, which the RAND report described as "insolvent." But no, as Mr. Brooks said "If you thought those questions would dominate the hearing, you must be living under the illusion that we live in a serious country. We do not.... We live in a social media/cable TV country" in which the aim is "not to advance an argument that might help the country; your job is to go viral." And so, questions at the hearing addressed

wokeness and other social issues, but never our preparedness, or lack of same, for conflicts with any one of our adversaries, let alone simultaneous conflicts with more than one.

Our President and Congress and indeed all of us must do some serious soul searching regarding our ability to support conflict on three fronts when at present, we can barely support our effort in Ukraine which is slowly proving to be insufficient to resist Russian advances. Will we have to scale back our support for Israel, our main barrier to Iranian proxied export of terrorism? Perhaps we will have to clarify that we're not "all in" after all when it comes to resisting a Chinese takeover of Taiwan. If we don't make appropriate preemptive decisions, we may well end up with another one or two Iraq or Afghanistan outcomes.

OK. Military preparedness is lacking. Defense spending as a percentage of GDP in 2023 was historically near the low end. The challenge is a massive buildup of our warships, aircraft, fighting vehicles, missiles, air defense systems, supply chains and other materials and services. But along with this will be, and in fact already is, a need for more manpower. Our recruiters are not meeting even the current requirements for all our military services with the exception of the Marine Corps.

Military service is one of the finest contributions one can make to our nation, either in an enlistment of two to six years for example, or even greater as a career. When guiding our youth moving on from high school we now talk about apprenticeships, STEM education or liberal arts in two or four years of college, or public service, but the journalists and other media rarely promote military service. When military service is addressed, lately the focus unfortunately has been on some bad raps related to the military, for example, DEI

guiding not only recruiting, but also duty assignments, or the misconception that veterans are excessively drawn to misguided patriot groups like the Proud Boys. Put this aside until the whole DEI issue is sorted out and it is determined what and when guidelines for diversity, equity and inclusion are appropriate. This is of course taking an inordinate amount of wasted time and effort but we are circling back to the equity portion, discarding equal outcomes in favor of meritocracy, and settling on equal opportunity which has been a hallmark of the military since President Truman desegregated the military and with which we can all agree.

As the leader of the free world, we have an obligation to strengthen our democracy, but also to support our democratic allies and promote any and all other nations with similar values. Yes, it would be nice if we could draw into our shell, leave others alone, and focus entirely on our domestic concerns. But we all know that's not the way it works. We can rely on diplomacy as a path to avoiding armed conflicts, but only if we back it up with a rebuilt military that will discourage China, Russia, Iran and North Korea from challenging us.

And we better do it quickly. Reliance on the Ukrainians to fight the battle with Russia --- which is really our battle and that of the of our European allies --- cannot go on forever. Even if they refuse to negotiate away any of the territory captured by the Russians, they will eventually run out of men and equipment and probably before the Russians do. Mr Putin must conclude that it is not in his best interest to continue, and he will not come to that conclusion unless he respects the combined might of the European Union and the United States. And Mr. Trump should continue to persuade our NATO allies to up their defense budgets and he should do the same with us.

It is incumbent upon us all, Republicans, Democrats, or other, to support our military buildup. So, in addition to encouraging our elected officials to massively increase funding for the military, we, and especially the media, should do more to encourage our youth to participate in national service and focus more on the military aspect.

Many of us believe that we should avoid wars at all costs. But a strong military is the best means to that end. That said, there are lots of other reasons aside from war for a strong military that should entice enlistment, for example, the National Guard combatting natural disasters, controlling civil unrest, or supporting the patrol of our southern border to halt illegal immigration including human trafficking for illegal purposes --- Coast Guard manpower to prevent contraband from entering our ports --- Naval patrol of international waters, e.g., the South China Sea, the Arabian Sea, the Black Sea and the Pacific to keep them open for international trade.

I believe the most critical and important aspect of participating in national service is that living, learning and working together with others from diverse backgrounds, all youth will become more aware of our social, economic, and political challenges --- will understand conflicting views on the issues --- will become more productive involved citizens to take action to confront the issues --- will vote and hold our elected officials accountable to negotiate, compromise and govern rather than obstruct --- and will be better equipped and motivated to go on to higher education, the trades and other careers. And this is where military service has a significant advantage over civilian service. To be sure, some AmeriCorps and other civilian service members live, learn and work full time with others of diverse backgrounds, but virtually all military personnel do.

David Brooks to whom I often refer, when discussing character building in his January 8 *New York Times* article said that “People’s characters are primarily formed...within an institution --- whether it’s a school, a biker gang, a company or the Marine Corps --- that has a distinct ethos, that hold up certain standards.” He goes on to say when talking about community service [which would include military service] that it “is not just to make society better; it is done to usher a transformation in the person doing the service. That happens when some ideal, held in the imagination, is lived through practical work performed by the body.” And I would add that a life of informed patriotism would be an obvious outcome.

And we also see the next most compelling argument favoring military service as development of leadership skills as a foundation for a successful career for both those serving in the military as well as those going on to civilian careers.

In 2020 (the last year available to me for this statistic) the Department of Defense estimated that only 23% of Americans ages 17–24, the bulk of the military applicants, meet the citizenship, health (obesity being a main factor), education and criminal background eligibility requirements for military service.

But while 23% of young people may be eligible to join the military, an even smaller percentage have the desire to do so. In 2022, the Department of Defense polled people ages 16–24 about their likelihood to join the military. Only 2% indicated that they would likely join the military within the next few years, and another 8% that they probably would. Conversely, 30% replied, “Probably not,” and 59% replied, “Definitely not.”

Among the reasons most often cited were concerns with physical injury or death, leaving family and friends, other career interests, and dislike of military lifestyle.

Then again, the DOD did determine that the eligible applicants are aware of the advantages of enlisting, the top three being pay, educational opportunities and travel.

(Note: Specific facts and figures above were taken from “Military Recruitment is down. Why don’t young Americans want to join?” published August 9, 2023 by USA Facts.)

So, how do we turn this around so that the advantages outweigh the concerns?

The National Commission on Military, National and Public Service spent three years from 2017 to 2020 investigating the nation’s desires and needs for a universal national service, military and civilian, program. Their final report *Inspired to Serve* had over 20 specific recommendations including: Outreach to community-based cadet and youth programs --- developing recruiting incentives targeted to areas with lower rates of propensity --- and eliminating barriers to access by recruiters to school activities as afforded to others that provide information to students and their families on career opportunities.

The Army’s latest recruiting video “Be All You Can Be” outlines the opportunities and benefits available in the Army for Full Time Active Duty, Part time Army Reserve, and Part time National Guard.

There are over 200 specific jobs available, and specific training for these begins after basic training. For enlisted personnel these include carpenter, mason, electrician, plumber, construction equipment repair, diver, quarrying specialist and many more --- for officers a wide variety from critical care nurse and other health care

careers to intelligence and other military careers. The training and experience in these positions well applies to civilian careers as well for those leaving the military.

The GI Bill Post – 9/11 program provides up to full college tuition for public and in-state schools, and more than \$25,000 per year at private or foreign schools, as well as money for housing and books. One must serve at least 90 days on active duty to receive benefits, and monetary benefits increase the longer one serves. Monthly housing allowances and a stipend for books are offered, and payments are made directly to the school.

In the other program, the Montgomery GI Bill, benefit payments are made directly to you, and you must serve active duty for at least two years. This option uses a combination of your own paycheck contributions and government funding to help pay for education benefits for up to 36 months. The benefits are available while serving or within ten years of completing service. Length of service, type of school or training program, and contributions will determine the amount to receive.

In addition to career choices and education support , other benefits include enlistment bonuses of up to \$50K, high quality, low or no cost health care and competitive paid time off.

Adding to all this, I see as another compelling inducement, the opportunity to serve in another of the 85 countries and territories where we have military bases.

OK --- any of you veterans --- reup?

For comments, further information or requests to unsubscribe,
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Step Forward America

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