

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 44
Number 3 *Parameters Autumn 2014*

Article 14

Fall 9-1-2014

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Recommended Citation

Kimberly Field, "Whose Breach, Whose Trust?," *Parameters* 44, no. 3 (2014), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2734.

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Whose Breach, Whose Trust?

Kimberly Field

Are we debating the right issues? Andrew Bacevich's *Breach of Trust* raises questions regarding the All Volunteer Force.

Andrew Bacevich's book, *Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country*, notes a stanza from the Zac Brown Band offering fried chicken, cold beer, and jeans as symbols of freedom for which soldiers fight (189). Using this piece of pop music, Bacevich concludes it once was everyone's job to fight for our birthright – freedom. Now, a small all-volunteer force represents a country that pursues power projection through non-stop use of the military or “war,” and has lost the ethical foundation of its service along the way. I have always been repelled by the stanza, for a slightly different reason. People have died; please do not put that in the same sentiment as eating chicken. To me the stanza came to represent the well-meaning, yet rather thoughtless patriotism of many American people and the unthinking acceptance of it by the military. Both the act of military service, and putting it into service, demand more thought.

Frankly, the conversation Bacevich wants us to have about the ethical foundation of the all-volunteer force is unlikely. The professional military believes in “sustain the all-volunteer force” akin to an ideology, in part because it works; twelve years of war, it did not break, and soldiers continued to perform as well as asked. Or does it work?

Success has surely been elusive in the last thirteen years and I am disappointed that, despite the truism of civilian policy control of the military, we simply will not analyze and debate our own part in less than successful outcomes.

Further, the acceptance of everything a grateful public heaped on us has brought with it a culture of entitlement to soldiers and their families. Many of us would say only those who suffer from grievous injuries and those families who have lost loved ones are deserving of hero status or commensurate compensation. Anything else conflicts with the selfless service necessary in an all-volunteer force.

Bacevich discusses how military officers often find fault within the service, but refuse to speak up in a system that either promotes them or kicks them out. Indeed, love of service and soldiers provides unconscious rationalization for the failure to question assumptions, provide creative options, or speak up as a lone voice. And to be damningly fair, the way we develop senior leaders precludes the propensity to voice misgivings in the first place.

Notwithstanding the excellent questions and points Bacevich's book raises, there are a number of problems with his argument. First, it seems to be propped up by a realist conviction that use of the military is to be reserved for existential threats to the American way of life. He consistently implies the only appropriate use of the US military is to deter and defend, not protect, build partner capacity, enable soft power, or pursue

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limited objectives as part of a whole of government effort. If you do not buy this premise, you do not buy his claim the biggest casualty of the all-volunteer force is its over-use. Those of us involved in the Afghanistan war - volunteers all - believe we advanced civilization regardless of any potential backslide when we withdrew. Whether the American people want to pay in lives or dollars for those types of interventions is indeed the right question, but the answer is not automatically, “no way.”

What is for certain, however, is we must find more affordable ways to pursue such ends should the answer be “yes.” And the all-volunteer force is indeed part of the problem: the Baskin Robbins deployments of the past twelve years are unaffordable; they may actually tie the hands of decision-makers going forward. In fact, that is happening today. This administration with its human rights and “responsibility to protect” doctrine would likely be more deeply involved in Syria, for example, were it not for the exorbitant cost of deploying an all-volunteer force.

Secondly, I cannot accept Bacevich's claim that military elites pushed America into one conflict after another for bureaucratic, parochial reasons. Is it not the responsibility of the service chiefs, combatant commanders, and other military leaders to reject “best case” hopes, organize, train and equip services for the worst, and provide advice on what can best address threats? Accusations of presenting “should versus could” to policy makers, complacency with big bureaucracy, and at times, unexceptional performance might be warranted. However, dragging the United States into war out of deliberate mal-intent and self-service seems a leap in logic we simply should not make with him.

Still, it is time to have the conversation that General (retired) McChrystal called for regarding the viability of the all-volunteer force. The sheer frequency and scale of the use of the military instrument since the end of the Cold War, costs that could actually *constrain* the use of landpower, evidence of effect on the military ethos, and the need for the Army to represent the nation truly, are issues of significant magnitude. While it is highly unlikely the all-volunteer force would be replaced with conscripts, civil-military dialogue might help the Army in solving some of the bigger issues it now faces:

- What in fact, is its mission? “Fight and win our nation’s wars” is neither statutory nor sufficient. How should leaders prepare the Army now for the future? The Army is currently reverting to an “attitude of winning + combat arms commander-centric focus = full spectrum success.”
- What is fair, non-politicized compensation? What level is in keeping with both selfless service and the standard of living of average Americans?
- What is the source of misconduct at all ranks? Does an all-volunteer force have the right to help shape the ethos of the US military in a way a conscription force would not? Do the types of missions we prepare for hold sway over a culture that is without a doubt profane, assertive, physical?

All of these questions – the big ones that must involve the public, civilian and military leaders – are as important, but not as visible as those raised during the advent of the all-volunteer force. But perhaps that is Bacevich’s point. Let’s have the debate.