

The One Percent Problem

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, JAN 5 2015

One of the strangest criticisms of US security policy is that it burdens a too small percentage of the American people because only about one percent of the adult population serves in the military. Because such a small percent of the population is at risk in American wars, American politicians are said to feel free to send the military to fight wasteful, unwinnable, and costly wars. The preference is apparently for conscription, which would put more of the population at risk, and supposedly lead to fewer and wiser wars. If only the politicians' sons or daughters were forced to serve is the lament.

The model is always the Second World War when over 12 million Americans were in uniform, more than 15 percent of the adult population of the time and a much higher percentage of the adult male population. The burden of fighting then was supposedly widely shared. The contrast is with today when less than 1.4 million men and women are active duty military and another 800 plus K are in the reserves. Given there are about 200 million Americans between the ages of 18-65, this is just over one percent of the relevant population.

There are several problems with the argument. Fifteen percent of 200 million would produce a military of 30 million, a bit large, one must say, for less than all out global warfare, the world we are in now. But even two percent produces a military of four million people; a third larger than the military on active duty during the 1960s when the Soviet Union was being confronted globally as well as a major war was being fought in Vietnam. Each year about four million Americans reach the age of 18. Currently, the American military needs less than 200K of them to volunteer for active duty or the reserves to maintain its numbers. With that pool, the military can insist on a high school education for enlisted personnel and a college degree for officers. Avoided are the medically unfit, those with serious criminal records, and those who would chafe under the discipline required.

Of course, the argument isn't that all of the age group should serve in the military. Rather it is that some form of public service should be required of all. But what would the government do with four million 18 year olds each year? Our hospitals, inner-city schools, and Indian reservations already have well paid employees to do the necessary work. Political correctness would require women face the same obligations as men. Who would be forced into the military or prison guard jobs? Could it be voluntary? Wouldn't that be the same system we have now? Wouldn't the rich and influential always find a way to make the service of their children career enhancing or at least safe?

During the Second World War there was a manpower crisis in the last year as the US found itself running out infantry soldiers. The better educated draftees were used in technical and support functions or found their way into safe and draft exempt civilian occupations. During the Vietnam War, the draft—in effect only to feed the infantry fighting the war—was essentially voluntary as those who wanted to avoid fighting joined the Navy, found an easy disqualification or fled the country. The current All Volunteer Force allows people to choose their risk and compensates them for it. Those who want to be in most hazardous branches of the armed services are double or triple volunteers, having had to decide to join the military and then opting for its most dangerous jobs.

Some might say that all who do so are coerced by their poverty to be in the military, making the military a home for blacks and others who are economically disadvantaged. African-Americans are indeed over-represented in the American military when compared to their percentage of the general population, but not of the prime relevant age group (18-24). The military is an attractive employer given its pay structure and post-career benefits. But minorities

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are over-represented in the non-combat occupations (medical services, transportation, administration etc.); combat arms are predominantly white, attracting youths who see themselves as spending some post-high school time in an adventure-land with guns and as having no intention of making the military a career. The volunteer military is actually less poor and better educated than the draft military because it is smaller and more selective than the draft military. One third of American youth, heavily minority, chose not to complete high school, and thus make themselves largely ineligible for the military even if they wish to serve.

In fact, more than one percent of Americans are involved in America's defense. In addition to the two plus million service personnel – the 1.4 million active duty and 800 K plus in the reserve components—there are 800 K plus civil service employees of the Department of Defense –people who work in military depots, defense laboratories, shipyards, and contract management offices—and five to six million (the exact number is not known) contract employees — people who build weapon systems, provide support services, and conduct defense related research. This totals to three or four percent of the adult population. Add spouses and other family members and you can see that a not insignificant portion of the American population is involved in defense.

One percent or eight, the interests of America's military, defense civil servants, and defense contractors are not ignored by politicians. Bad wars aren't the product of a military that is too easy to commit and too small to count politically. Rather, the bad wars are the result of America being the global policemen, seeking to guarantee the security of too many others and creating the expectation that America will intervene in every dispute where force may be involved. It isn't that soldiers' lives aren't valued. Actually, the concern with their casualties has grown with time even after conscription was abolished. It is just that American presidents are expected to act –to do something when trouble starts in the Middle East, when North Korea rattles some sabers, when Russia tries to change its boundaries, and when chaos rules in Africa. Doing something often involves the deployment of ships, the use of soldiers as advisors, a missile strike and the start of a bombing campaign. One thing leads to another, but rarely to a quick, easy victory.

A better criticism is that America has stopped paying for its wars. In the past, wars brought dedicated tax increases and the sharing of burdens broadly among citizens—taxpayers and voters as well as the soldiers in the fight. But the Global War on Terror instead gave Americans tax cuts, deficits, and borrowing on a massive scale which was readily obtained from foreigners at low interest rates. The domestic political constraints on the use of force are only casualties and not a growing financial burden on taxpayers. The costs of wars are passed to future generations, those not yet with a vote. This is not a good development. Few citizens are warriors or need to be, but all should pay for their country's wars.

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.