

# The All-Volunteer Military: Calling, Profession, or Occupation?

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*This article was first published in the 1977 issue of Parameters.*

**D**iscussion of the future of the armed forces usually involves a concern with technological developments or global strategy. To most of its membership, however, the military is understood and experienced as a social organization. Our purpose here is to apply developmental analysis to the emergent military from a sociological perspective.

Developmental analysis entails historical reconstruction, trend specification, and most especially, a model of a future state of affairs toward which actual events are heading.<sup>1</sup> It emphasizes the “from here to there” sequence of present and hypothetical events. Stated in a slightly different way, a developmental construct is a “pure type” placed at some future point, by which we may ascertain and order the emergent reality of contemporary social phenomena. Models derived from developmental analysis bridge the empirical world of today with the social forms of the future. Put plainly, what is the likely shape of the military in the foreseeable future?

Initially, three models—calling, profession, occupation—will be presented, describing alternative conceptions of military social organization. These models are evaluated as to which best fits current empirical indicators. The basic hypothesis is that the all-volunteer American military is moving toward an organizational format more and more resembling that of an occupation. Secondly, there will be a specification of some expected organizational outcomes in the military system resulting from the shift to an occupational model. Finally, there will be several therapeutic proposals which might channel these evolutions toward a reemphasis of the military’s proper role in national service.

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## ***Calling, Profession, Occupation***

Terms like calling, profession, or occupation suffer from imprecision, both in popular and scholarly discussion. Nevertheless, they each contain core connotations which serve to distinguish them from one another. For present purposes these distinctions can be described as follows:

- A *calling* is legitimated in terms of institutional values, i.e., a purpose transcending individual self-interest in favor of a presumed higher good. A calling usually enjoys high esteem from the larger community because it is associated with notions of self-sacrifice and complete dedication to one's role. Although a calling does not obtain remuneration comparable to what one might expect in the economy of the marketplace, this is often compensated for by an array of social benefits associated with an institutional format. Members of a calling generally regard themselves as being different or apart from the broader society and are so regarded by others. When grievances are felt, members of a calling do not organize themselves into self-interest groups. Rather, if redress is sought, it takes the form of "one-on-one" recourse to superiors, with its implications of trust in the paternalism of the institution to take care of its own.

Military service has traditionally had many features close to the calling model. One thinks of the extended tours abroad; the fixed term of the enlistment; liability for 24-hour service availability; frequent movement of self and family; subjection to military discipline and law; and inability to resign, strike, or negotiate over working conditions. All this is above and beyond the dangers inherent in military maneuvers and actual combat operations.

It is also significant that a paternalistic remuneration system has evolved in the military corresponding to the calling mode: compensation received in noncash form (e.g., food, housing, uniforms), subsidized consumer facilities on the base, payments to service members partly determined by family status, and a large proportion of compensation received as deferred pay in the form of retirement benefits.

- A *profession* is legitimated in terms of specialized expertise, i.e., a skill level formally accredited after long, intensive, academic training. The prerogatives of the professional center around conditions supportive of skill levels, control of the work situation, and determination of ethical practices by one's peers. Compensation is often in the form of fee for service and a function of individual expertise. There is also the presumption that the practice of one's specialty will be a lifetime career. A profession typically advances its group interests through the form of professional associations.

The term "military professional" is one widely used by service members to describe themselves. It is also a characterization used by leading students of the military to describe career officers.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, the multitiered military education system for officers—as typified by the service academies, command schools, and the war colleges—is patterned after the professional model.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the various service associations closely resemble their counterparts in civilian professional associations. Yet, the concept of profession applied to the military does have its limitations. Military compensation is a function of rank, seniority, and need—not, strictly speaking, professional expertise. (The

exception to this occurs, interestingly enough, when the military organization takes into account—via the mechanism of off-scale compensation—certain professionals whose skills are intrinsically nonmilitary, the notable example being medical doctors.) There is also the reality that few officers can make the military their entire career (unlike civilian professionals, whose endeavors are lifetime careers). Moreover, inasmuch as the term “military professional” in its normal usage refers to career commissioned officers, does this imply that others in military service are somehow “non-professionals” or, worse, “amateurs”? To complicate matters further, many of the forces eroding the institutional format of the calling are affecting the professional model as well—within and outside the military.

- An *occupation* is legitimated in terms of the marketplace, i.e., prevailing monetary rewards for equivalent competencies. In a modern industrial society, employees usually enjoy some voice in the determination of appropriate salary and work conditions. Such rights are counterbalanced by responsibilities to meet contractual obligations. The occupational model implies that priority inheres in self-interest rather than in the task itself or in the employing organization. A common form of interest articulation in industrial—and, increasingly, governmental—occupations is the trade union.

Traditionally, the military has sought to avoid the organizational outcomes of the occupational model. This is in the face of repeated recommendations of official commissions that the armed services adopt a salary system which would incorporate all basic pay, allowances, and tax benefits into one cash payment, and which would eliminate compensation differences between married and single personnel, thus conforming to the “equal-pay-for-equal-work” principle of civilian occupations. Such a salary system would set up an employer-employee relationship quite at variance with military tradition. Nevertheless, even in the conventional military system, there has been some accommodation to occupational imperatives. Special supplements have long been found necessary to recruit and retain highly skilled enlisted personnel.

The above models of calling, profession, and occupation are, of course, as much caricatures as they are descriptions of reality. In the case of the military, moreover, the reality is complicated in that the armed forces have elements of all three models. There are also important differences between the various services, but the heuristic value of the typology is valid. It allows for a conceptual understanding of the overarching and clearly dominant trends occurring within the contemporary all-volunteer military—the decline of the calling, the limits of professionalism, and the ascendancy of the occupational model.

Although antecedents predated the appearance of the all-volunteer force in early 1973, it was the end of the draft which served as the major thrust to move the military toward the occupational model. In contrast to the all-volunteer force, the selective service system was premised on the notion of citizenship obligation—with concomitant low salaries for lower enlisted personnel—and the ideal of a broadly representative enlisted force (though this ideal was not always realized in practice). In point of fact, it was the occupational model which clearly underpinned the philosophical rationale of the 1970 report of the President’s Commission on an All-Volunteer Force (“Gates Commission

Report”<sup>4</sup>).<sup>4</sup> Instead of a military system anchored in the normative values of a calling—captured in words like “Duty,” “Honor,” “Country”—the Gates Commission explicitly argued that primary reliance in recruiting an armed force should be on monetary inducements guided by marketplace standards.

It is important to stress that although the Army was the only service to rely directly on large numbers of draftees for its manpower needs, all the services were beneficiaries of the selective service system. It is estimated that close to half of all voluntary accessions into the military in the peacetime years between the wars in Korea and Vietnam were draft-motivated. The draft was also the major impetus for recruitment into the ROTC and the reserve/guard units.

While the termination of the selective service system is the most dramatic change in the contemporary military system, other indicators of the trend toward the occupational model can also be noted: (1) the significant pay increases given the armed forces since 1971 in an effort to make military compensation competitive with civilian rates; (2) the previously mentioned recommendations of governmental panels to establish a military salary system, thus making civilian-military remuneration “comparable”; (3) proposals to eliminate or reduce a host of military benefits, e.g., subsidies for commissaries and exchanges, health care for dependents, and the pension system; (4) the separation of work and residence locales accompanying the growing proportion of single enlisted men living off base; (5) the incipient resistance of many military wives at officer and noncom levels to taking part in customary social functions; and (6) the unacceptably high rate of attrition and desertion among enlisted personnel in the post-Vietnam military. The sum of these and related changes confirming the ascendancy of the occupational model in the social organization of the emergent all-volunteer military.

### ***Consequences of the Occupational Model***

A shift in the rationale of the military toward the occupational model implies organizational consequences in the structure and, perhaps, the function of the armed forces. The discussion which follows is not to be construed as advocacy of such organizational consequences nor even of their inevitability. But it does argue that if the industrialization of the military continues, then certain outcomes are to be anticipated. If any of these outcomes are deemed undesirable, attention should be directed at their causes—the transformation of the military into an occupation—and not simply at the outcomes themselves.

Two changes in particular are presently apparent in military social organization: (1) the growing likelihood of unionization in the armed services, and (2) the increasing reliance on contract civilians to perform military tasks. Even though seemingly unrelated, both such organizational changes derive from the ascendant occupational model. Each deserves a little elaboration.

### ***Trade Unionism***

That trade unionism might take place within the armed forces of the United States was barely more than a remote thought just a few years ago. But

today there are signs that such an eventuality could come to pass. The growing labor militancy of previously quiescent public employees at municipal, state, and federal levels may be a precursor of like activity within the military system. Even the “professional” diplomatic corps has come to be represented by a union in all but name—the American Foreign Service Association. Military trade unions have been long-standing in many Western European countries, including several NATO members.<sup>5</sup> But it was the advent of the all-volunteer force which made unionization of the American armed forces a live possibility. The reliance on monetary incentives to recruit an armed force is quite consistent with the notion of trade unionism.

In 1975, the National Maritime Union (NMU), a union affiliated with the AFL-CIO, reported that it was considering organizing sailors in the US Navy. The independent Association of Civilian Technicians (ACT) has been for some time a union for civilians who work full-time for the reserve and guard (almost all of whom are also members of the units employing them). The most substantial initiatives, by far, of the various possibilities for military trade unionism are those of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), affiliated with the AFL-CIO. In its 1976 annual convention, the AFGE amended its constitution to extend membership eligibility to military personnel serving on active duty. The bulk of the AFGE’s 325,000 membership already consists of civilian employees working on military installations. By early 1977, though still stopping short of a concerted organizing drive, the AFGE appeared to be preparing to accept members of the armed forces into its own ranks.

It is important to emphasize that groups like the AFGE, NMU, and the ACT are staunchly patriotic, conservative in their approach to social change, and professedly bread-and-butter unions. There is no connection between these unions and the radicalized and self-styled servicemen’s unions which appeared in the late years of the Vietnam War. But there is a potentially disquieting implication if such established unions succeed in organizing the military: the politicization of the armed services arising from the usually close working relationship of the AFL-CIO with the Democratic party at national and local levels.

Legal obstacles do exist in the way of military unions. Current Defense Department directives allow service members to join unions, but forbid commanders from negotiating with unions. Additionally, legislation was introduced in the 94th Congress to prohibit unionization of the armed forces (including reserve/guard as well as active-duty personnel). Congress took no action on the measure in that session, but similar bills are expected to be introduced subsequently. Even if a law prohibiting military unions were to be passed by Congress and signed by the Chief Executive, its constitutionality would certainly be tested in the courts. Military commanders already are permitted to negotiate with unionized civilian employees on military installations. Since 1975, moreover, military commanders have been delegated explicit authority to sign local labor agreements with civilian personnel. Also indicative of the changing scenes are those cases in which groups of Navy enlisted technicians whose special enlistment bonuses were canceled have demonstrated and filed suit for either payment of their bonuses or immediate discharges.

It goes without saying that military unions are anathema to almost all senior officers and many civilians. Yet, throughout the ranks of military personnel, there is a widespread view—and a quite accurate one at that—that the institutional qualities of military life are being undermined. Currently, this dissatisfaction centers around the perceived erosion of military benefits and the job insecurities resulting from periodic reductions in force. Not so well understood is that the institutional features of the military system may have been traded off for the relatively good salaries enjoyed by military personnel in the all-volunteer force. The potential for unionization is great precisely because military social organization has moved in the direction of the occupational model, while much of its membership harkens to the social supports of the older institutional format. It is also possible that a unionized military would not be accorded the favor it presently enjoys from the public (which is prone to view the military as the embodiment of a calling).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it is likely that a military union might be looked upon in more crass terms than would be anticipated, owing to the burgeoning reaction against public employee unions in general.

### *Civilian Technicians*

Where trends toward military unionization are organizational developments which could be incorporated—albeit with some strain—into the structure of the armed forces, another consequence of the ascendant occupational model departs entirely from formal military social organization. This is the use of civilians to perform tasks which by any conventional measure would be seen as military in content. The private armies of the Central Intelligence Agency have long been an object of concern within the regular military command, but what is anomalous in the emerging order is that, rather than assigning its own military personnel, the US government increasingly gives contracts directly to civilian firms—with salary levels much higher than comparable military rates—to perform difficult military tasks. In other words, the very structure of the military system no longer encompasses the full range of military functions.

It is hard to overstate the degree to which the operational side of the military system is now reliant on civilian technicians. The large warships of the US Navy are combat ineffective without the technical skills of the contract civilians—the so-called “tech reps”—who permanently serve aboard those ships. Major Army ordnance centers, including those in the combat theater, require the skills of contract civilians to perform necessary maintenance and assembly. Missile warning systems in Greenland are in effect civilian-manned military installations run by firms who are responsible to the US Air Force. In Southeast Asia and Saudi Arabia, private companies such as Air America and Vinnel Corporation were given US government contracts to recruit civilians who carried out military activities. Bell Helicopter and Grumman established a quasi-military base in Isfahan, Iran, staffed by former American military personnel, who trained Iranian pilots.<sup>7</sup> During the collapse of South Vietnam, chartered civilian aircraft were used to rescue American nationals under virtual combat conditions. The American monitoring force in the Sinai was contracted out to private industry, with the government retaining only policy control.

External political considerations certainly impinge upon the decisions to use civilian contracts for military tasks. But if task efficiency is the issue, a more nagging implication also suggests itself: military personnel cannot or will not perform arduous, long-term duty with the efficacy of contract civilians. If this were to become the norm, beliefs conducive to organizational integrity and societal respect—the whole notion of military legitimacy—become untenable. The trend toward the employment of contract civilians to carry out military tasks could be the culmination of the industrialization of the military purpose.

Developmental analysis applied to military social organization reveals the impetus and probable outcomes of present trends in the military. The hypothesis of the ascendant occupational model in the military system alerts one to and makes sense out of organizational changes in the social structure of the military trade unionism. Concurrently, functions hitherto the province of armed forces personnel will increasingly be performed through civilian contracts.

To describe observable trends in military organization is not to mean they are inevitable. If there is concern with current developments—the possibility of trade unionism, excessive reliance on contract civilians, service morale, and the rest—then attention should be focused on the root cause—the ascendancy of the occupational model—and not just on the overt symptoms. Of concern should be how to maintain and strengthen the institutional qualities of service life, how to adapt and reinvigorate the *calling* aspects in a modern and complex military system. Developmental analysis offers an understanding of the core social dynamics affecting the emergent military. Most important, such understanding can serve to direct organizational change toward desirable ends.

### ***Counteraction—And Beyond . . . ?***

Although I have tried to be dispassionate in my analysis, I believe the evidence is persuasive that current trends are moving the armed forces of the United States toward norms and structures of an occupation. I would be remiss, then, not to specify policy proposals which could counteract the ascendant occupational model. Such proposals might include: (1) a “plural military” which would heighten the distinction within the armed service between the more civilianized support components and the more military operational units;<sup>8</sup> (2) trading off future pay raises for maintenance of noncash benefits; (3) shifting the role of the senior noncommissioned officer away from emphasis on unit administration and toward more concern with the guidance of lower-ranking enlisted personnel; (4) an internal-educational program accenting the broader purpose and nonmonetary values of military service; (5) a recruitment policy allowing short enlistments—perhaps two years—tied to post-service educational benefits, and geared toward combat arms and relatively nontechnical assignments; and (6) service innovations in group representation procedures other than that of the standard trade union. Each of the above proposals, separately or in some combination, would probably counteract in part the present transformation of the military into an occupation.

To phrase the issue of the all-volunteer military solely in terms of factors internal to the military organization, however, is to beg the larger

question. Ultimately, the organizational direction of the emergent military is connected with more general societal values of citizen participation and obligation. Even though there is renewed talk of reinstating conscription in the wake of the recruitment and retention inadequacies of the all-volunteer force, this possibility is viewed as unlikely in the current political climate. But, more importantly, a return to the draft might well result in troop morale and discipline problems exceeding what the military system could accommodate.

The central question remains: is there a way in which military service can attract a large and representative cross section of American youth without direct compulsion? I believe there is. Now is the time to consider a voluntary national service program—in which military service is one of several options—which would be a prerequisite for future federal employment.

For purposes of discussion, a two-year national service program aimed at youth—male and female—is proposed. Such service would be expected to take place after high school, or during or after college. National service would be compensated for at levels comparable to that formerly given draftees. It would be directed toward tasks which intrinsically cannot be filled through sheer monetary incentives; for example, caring for the aged, infirm, and mentally feeble; performing conservation work; and serving in the combat arms of the armed forces. In turn, only those who had completed such national service would be eligible for later government employment at the federal level.

In terms of military manpower needs, this would mean assignment to the ground combat arms and manual tasks in other services; it could also be oriented toward overseas assignment. Because the terms of such service would be unambiguous, there would be no presumption of acquiring civilian transferable skills, thus alleviating a major source of enlisted discontent in the all-volunteer force. Such a manpower program would also have the merit of channeling middle-class youth into relatively short assignments in the very military occupational specialties where such enlistments are most practical. Almost surely, despite shorter tours than current enlistments, the effective length of military service would not be markedly different from present, because increasing the proportion of high school graduates would reduce the existing high attrition rate among first-term servicemen.

At the same time, provision could be made for long-term personnel who would be geared toward technical positions requiring extended training. It would be expected that a combination of equal opportunity practices within the military and the reality of the civilian marketplace would result in increasing the representation of minorities in such long-term military positions.

Certainly such a national service plan would cause a fundamental readjustment of hiring priorities in the governmental sector. A modest precedent of sorts has been the preferential treatment accorded veterans in the federal civil service examination. Much discussion is needed on the manner in which the implementation and details of such a program could be worked out. But the core of the proposal is irreducible—some linkage between national service and future government employment.

A voluntary national service program linked to future federal employment eligibility has many positive implications. It would avoid the “stick” of



compulsion, but still appeal to a large constituency because of the “carrot” of possible employment in the governmental sector. It would meet pressing national needs in both the civilian and military spheres. It would be philosophically defensible by connecting future employment by the taxpayer to prior commitment to national service. It would make public service an essential part of growing up in America. Most important, it would clarify the military’s role by emphasizing the larger calling of national service.

Taken together with the policy proposals enumerated earlier, this national service program might well supply that factor thus far so sadly lacking in properly completing the cycle with which this paper has been concerned: *obligation*, calling, profession, or occupation.<sup>9</sup>

#### NOTES

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9. The author wishes to express his grateful acknowledgement of the support received from the US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences during the preparation of this article. Sole responsibility for all findings and interpretation rests, of course, with him.