

Retired Lt. Gen Spoehr discusses viability of military service

By John Goulette - USAWC Public Affairs 07 June 2022



(Ret.) Lt. Gen. Thomas Spoehr, Director of the Heritage Foundation Center for National Defense, discusses Army recruitment and the viability of military service during NSS week keynote lecture.

The United States military has been a strictly voluntary service since conscription ended in the 1970s. A speaker at the Army War College challenged the student body and National Security Seminar participants to address the question: How can the Army increase its recruiting in a competitive job market, and adapt to the desires of the younger generations?

This week, 160 NSS participants, a cross-section of Americans from various geographic regions and diverse backgrounds, are exchanging ideas with USAWC students in candid dialogue about national security, June 6-9 at the Army War College.

Ret. Lt. Gen. Thomas Spoehr, Director of the Heritage Foundation Center for National Defense, discussed the problems of Army recruitment and how the Army can become a more competitive option for the younger generation.

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According to Spoehr, the Army is encountering five issues related to recruiting: a stagnant number of younger adults, the declining ability of those younger adults to qualify for the military, a strong labor market that brings competition to military service, a decrease in the public propensity to serve, and the Army's inability to implement new technological strategies to attract talent.

He noted that health issues, among others, limit the recruiting population to only 23 percent of the American population, exacerbating the fact that the 18–24-year age group has stayed the same for some years and is not going to increase soon.

Spoehr emphasized the importance of benefits that the military can bring to someone who enlists, like a potential long-term career, life stability, and financial benefits like signing bonuses.

“When the small percentage of people who can and will serve have other options, like going to college or joining the workforce immediately, it is important to market the benefits of joining the Army,” said Spoehr.

“Otherwise, we are going to have a shortage of people necessary to adequately fulfill our objectives.”

He mentioned that if younger people realize that they can serve in the military, accomplish things outside of service, and then after serving they still are able to join the workforce and see the benefits of their service, enlisting would be more attractive. Spoehr stated that if people realized the career advancement opportunity you could have if you joined, enlisting would attract more people.

Spoehr also suggests that civic policy and military outreach be improved so young people can see military personnel in their daily lives. Some examples given were the role of a recruiter in a high school, or speaking engagements, whether in a school or a public setting. Interacting with military personnel daily is important to community building and a better understanding of the role of the military, says Spoehr. This interaction and understanding would lead to a greater willingness to serve.

Directly after Spoehr's lecture the NSS participants and war college students assembled in their assigned seminar groups for further discussions. Seminar members immediately tried to determine how best to influence younger people to enlist. The seminar groups strongly agreed that more emphasis needs to be put on the benefits of military service during recruiting.

“The issues the speaker talked about are the same issues I see when trying to fill police officer positions,” said Louis Dekmar, Police Chief of LaGrange, Georgia. “Leaders must realize that we are recruiting in a new paradigm. We need to continuously think about what people want, like sign-on bonuses, increased benefits, PTO, etc.”

“We also need to realize that numbers are not all that matters,” said USAWC faculty member G.K. Cunningham. “While enlistment numbers are important in sustaining a military, we must recognize that the soldier's needs and happiness matter too. Ensuring that is a priority is how we will sustain our military.”

This year’s NSS themes explore the Secretary of the Army’s priorities: to put the Army on a sustainable strategic path amidst this uncertainty; to ensure the Army becomes more data-centric and can conduct operations in contested environments; to continue our efforts to be resilient in the face of climate change; to build positive command climates at scale across all Army formations; to reduce harmful behaviors in our Army; to strategically adapt the way we recruit and retain talent into the Army to sustain the all-volunteer force. Spoehr concluded the series of keynote speakers by focusing on recruiting and retaining talent.

The weeklong NSS agenda weaved large group lectures, small group discussions, and informal exchanges to impart an understanding of the complexity of national security while engraining the importance of relationships among diverse perspectives.

For more about the National Security Seminar experience at the Army War College, see the links on this page. Find photos at www.flickr.com/photos/usawc.