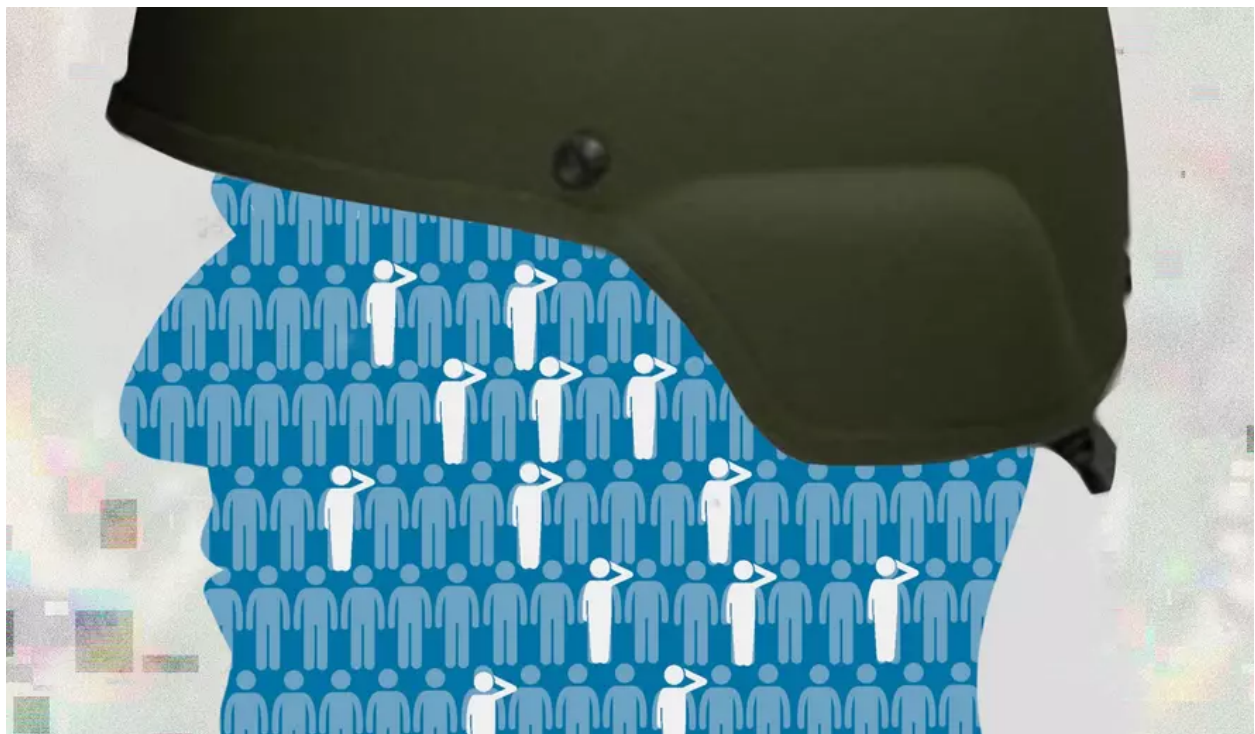


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Solving the Generation Z military recruitment crisis

A deepening divide between American society and the small population that serves



OPINION:

By Kenneth Hartman and Matt Weiss - - *Tuesday, August 29, 2023*

What happens if we have a war and nobody shows up to fight?

With military recruitment at an all-time low, the entire notion of the “all-volunteer” force that has kept us safe for 50 years is in peril. Research by the RAND Corporation reports that “propensity [to enlist is] hovering around 13% for the general youth population aged 16-21.” One thing that both Democrats and Republicans can agree on is that Generation Z and the military are not seeing eye to eye.

The two of us both joined the armed forces during periods of low recruitment. While generations apart, we've seen a sadly deepening divide between American society and the small population that serves.

Three major factors reside in common between the 70's Carter era and now: Domestic political strife, public opinion on a military tarnished by epic mission failures (Iranian hostage rescue, withdrawal from Afghanistan), and a highly inflationary economy (with the 31st month of their terms showing 7.4% for Carter's presidency vs. 4.7% for current administration). These factors have, in both instances, contributed to a feeling in young people that more important issues exist internally rather than overseas. Then and now, many young Americans describe a "lack of mission" in relation to military service.

Conversely, the modern era is fraught with additional challenges that make this recruiting crisis even more severe. Generation Z has increased mental health issues compared to Boomers, with nearly 18% of Z'ers reporting anxiety diagnoses. Technology is also taking over daily Z activities, with 87% reporting that they use social media as their primary outlet for news consumption. Finally, Z has a changing view of modern work due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

While numerous reports and articles detail some of the causes behind this recruiting drought, we believe new ideas and discussions need to occur to reverse this trend.

To start, the military has to undergo a period of change to better align with the current generation. Gen Z wants to differentiate itself through competition. They are not the "everyone gets a trophy generation" but rather the "I want more likes than my peers, so I stand out" generation. They innovate in everything, and they expect their employers to do the same. Reskilling programs, performance-based pay, and remote work are all new models of task achievement that Z is beginning to demand.

The Army's new campaign of "Be All You Can Be" successfully taps into Z's desire for self-betterment. It accurately recognizes that a prime driver for service isn't patriotism or idealistic thoughts but rather a pragmatic gain made via investment in one's career.

Additionally, a collective shift in societal perception is required to restore the rightful honor and recognition of volunteering for military service. Recognition of the act of enlistment, at the very least, should be treated with as much acclaim as acceptance to a university. Local communities have to begin today to reprioritize these courageous volunteers.

We host 'signing days' for high school athletes attending Division I colleges, but where are the "signing days" for our nation's newest and youngest service members?

Working to increase education levels and local fitness standards (with 11% of the population reporting poor physical health) are two base areas that every town can get behind in order to increase the pool of eligible service members.

Uncle Sam saying, "I Want You" became the most iconic recruiting slogan of our nation's history. Sadly, today's young people are saying, "We Don't Want You, Uncle Sam." While this may be a dismal reality, we firmly believe that we have a chance to turn the tide. By encouraging

open discussion of service in as many venues and conversations as possible, we can begin to reignite Z's consideration for military service.

While this crisis truly presents a gaping national security issue, it also shows the best path to creating stability in this world and protecting our society. We must all begin discussing national military service on a more frequent basis, helping Z see that Uncle Sam doesn't just want them anymore ... he needs them.

Dr. Kenneth Hartman, an Army veteran, is President of Our Community Salutes-USA, a non-profit organization that honors young Americans who enlist into the military. Matthew Weiss is a Second Lieutenant in the US Marine Corps. He is a member of Generation Z, and author of the book "We Don't Want You, Uncle Sam: Examining the military recruiting crisis with Generation Z" (2023)