



## *The Rise of the Military Welfare State* by Jennifer Mittelstadt.

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*The Rise of the Military Welfare State* is a thought-provoking examination of growing US militarism and the economic costs of the transition from a conscripted to an all-volunteer (or all-mercenary) force. It will interest policy-makers, military professionals, and, not least, the taxpayers who have subsidized American military endeavors over the past forty years. Author Jennifer Mittelstadt (Rutgers Univ.) highlights government attempts to reduce these expenditures by outsourcing various functions to private contractors or by eliminating them altogether—at the expense of the troops who serve. She exposes the financial costs of “supporting the troops” and their families and asks whether, in a badly polarized political environment, they can be sustained even as social support programs for civilians evaporate. Mittelstadt identifies the true villains here as not anti-military pacifists but federal bureaucrats, who continue to support military interventions while trying to slash programs relied on by the families of soldiers. She notes that shady contractors have absorbed many support functions with no cost savings and reduced levels of service. Ultimately, she advises, politicians, service members, and the public at large must ask whether the present support system is sustainable and what the answer will mean for an interventionist American foreign policy.

I commend Mittelstadt for revealing the inner workings of the military welfare state and asking vital questions about its future. Though she concentrates on the largest service, the US Army, her analysis applies as well to the other branches. The book proceeds chronologically from the end of the draft after the Vietnam War through today’s various wars on terror. She also considers the growing alignment of the religious right with the military services, under the guise supporting traditional families.

The work begins with the Army’s quandary of attracting a high quality volunteer force in the face of shrinking defense allocations and the unpopularity of the military after Vietnam. The Army’s solution—an attractive package of personnel benefits emphasizing stable employment and opportunities for higher education—languished in the 1970s but caught fire in the early 1980s during the Reagan administration’s buildup of conventional forces in response to growing Soviet hegemony.

The program succeeded almost too well, but the Army grew concerned that its “service members” were acting like “employees” simply doing their jobs rather than soldiers fulfilling an obligation to society, especially after the American Federation of Government Employees tried (and failed) to unionize servicemen. Here Mittelstadt highlights the spectacle of the wealthiest, most powerful nation in the world having to induce its citizens to serve through massive bribery. Such a de facto mercenary army was, she observes, exactly what President Richard Nixon envisioned in ending conscription in favor of a “private security force” that presidents could deploy at will without needing any public commitment or risking public debate (32–33). Military history is replete with cautionary tales of states that collapsed after striking just such Faustian bargains.

In the 1980s, the Army realized that the best way to retain well trained, expensively educated service people was to offer them and, importantly, their spouses an extensive array of benefits such as housing, commissary and exchange privileges, and healthcare for dependents. A study of the support

given the “Army family” by conservative, very often religious, organizations could be the subject of an entire book.

The Army urged military spouses to join and work (without pay) for “Family Support Groups” as a tacit quid pro quo for the benefits they were receiving (126, 139). These spouses, predominantly wives, came to resent such demanding expectations, especially as the Army deployed overseas for the First Gulf War and their options in the civilian workplace were curtailed by frequent relocations and the conservative presumption that they would stay at home, raise children, and subserviently further their husbands’ careers (134). Mittelstadt astutely clarifies the sometimes conflicting goals of soldiers, families, Army bureaucrats, and outside groups.

A brief chapter on the Army’s collusion with conservative Christian groups is the most enlightening in the book. Mittelstadt shows that the Army’s eagerness to outsource its family support functions to the chaplaincy as a cost-savings measure had many unintended consequences. For example, evangelical groups and chaplains assaulted the Army “club” lifestyle with the fervor of prohibitionists and predictable effects on unit morale and cohesion (155). When soldiers could no longer socialize over a drink, evening bible study became a more viable option.

Allowing religious groups to take over social programs naturally led to increased proselytization and evangelization by zealots who viewed soldiers as “free missionaries,” who could spread their message through the ranks and across the world, whether or not the “crusade” furthered national security goals or harmed unit morale (157, 162). In some cases, religious groups even argued for cutting government support to families, forcing them to seek (and pay for) it from religious organizations (168). When the downsized military reduced religious organizations’ access to funds and souls, it made them ardent and vocal proponents of increased military spending and allies of the hawkish elements of the conservative movement.

In response to the budget reductions of the 1990s, the Army stressed self-reliance and expected its soldiers and their families to take care of themselves without the expensive social services and benefits once provided by the Army. A kind of “ebb and flow” pattern ensued. The Reagan administration and a Democratic-controlled Congress poured billions into defense funding, much of which trickled down to the individual soldier. Then, the Clinton administration and a compliant Republican-controlled Congress subcontracted many defense tasks to the civilian sector; the privatization of military housing, for example, amounted to a massive gift of government property to corporations.

As a result of these developments, the George W. Bush administration went to war, as defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld put it, with the military and the support structure it had rather than the more effective organization it desired (221–23); this downsized force, subjected to multiple combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, could not cope with the surge in PTSD cases, suicides, and other social crises that engulfed military families left with little more than paeans to self-reliance and fatuous slogans—“Army Strong.” The contracting-out of core capabilities such as health care further victimized service members, most visibly at Walter Reed Army Medical Center (225).

In a cursory conclusion, the author outlines recent sequestration struggles and anticipates that the emotionally toxic debate over “supporting the troops” will become a new norm. Indeed, since *The Rise of the Military Welfare State* was published, the Department of Defense has pushed a cheaper pension reform plan that reduces service members’ retirement plans after 2018 in favor of a civilian 401K-type program. This will be a boon to financial services companies and retirement portfolio managers, while shifting the risk of retirement saving onto the backs of service members and their families. Military health care recipients and beneficiaries are now managed by private firms that limit access to care and reimburse physicians so poorly that many refuse to accept the insurance. As Mittelstadt accurately points out, these “programs decreased total benefits and increased private sector access to government

funds and the money of military personnel” (226), with potentially far-reaching consequences: after all, “if soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines can have their benefits outsourced and privatized—even while they are at war—what will become of the social programs that remain for civilians?” (228).

This salutary study highlights the paradox of a highly socialist military that offers significant upward mobility to its members even as civilians see their social benefits slashed and the American dream of the shrinking middle class becomes a nightmare. The military-welfare state (ironically, most heavily promoted during the Reagan years) is becoming a prime example of a conservative *bête noir*—the use of elected office to dispense favors to supporters (here, corporations) through welfare programs. It is disturbing that military personnel who overwhelmingly self-identify as conservative and Republican<sup>1</sup> have gained increased social mobility, access to higher education, and well paid employment through government-funded programs, while middle-class civilians have suffered from steep increases in tuition, wage depression, and loss of social status. The American dream still lives on, but only for centurions.

*The Rise of the Military Welfare State*, like all excellent histories, raises more questions than it answers. In chronicling the rise of the military’s welfare apparatus, Jennifer Mittelstadt forces readers to consider unflinchingly the tremendous cost of maintaining the massive US peacetime military. Budget hawks and taxpayers alike are finally awakening to the true impact of that financial commitment. At the same time, military professionals must guard against an increasing share of scarcer tax dollars going to the private sector instead of to the men and women actually putting their lives on the line in defense of their country.

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1. See Shanea Watkins and James Sherk, “Who Serves in the U.S. Military? The Demographics of Enlisted Troops and Officers,” *Center for Data Analysis Report #08-05* (21 Aug 2008) – [www.miwsr.com/rd/1613.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1613.htm).