

MILITARY

In Trump's orbit, some muse about mandatory military service

Only 1 percent of the U.S. population serves in the armed forces. Some in the former president's camp say it's time more young adults put "some skin in the game."

By Juliann Ventura and Julian Andreone

Updated June 13, 2024 at 9:55 a.m. EDT | Published June 11, 2024 at 5:00 a.m. EDT

TEXARKANA, Tex. — Kyra Rousseau remembers feeling trapped in her high school media center last fall when a phalanx of military personnel and faculty members shut the doors behind her and about 100 classmates before gathering everyone's phones.

Rousseau, 18, was a senior here at Liberty-Eylau High School. The service members were recruiters. She recalled asking to leave but being told to sit down — that her graduation hinged on completion of a military aptitude test.

"They tricked us," Rousseau said. "They said 'ASVAB,' but they didn't say what the ASVAB was."

It stands for the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, a standardized test developed by the Defense Department decades ago to help the military funnel recruits into occupations that match their skills and intellect. And if Donald Trump's last defense secretary could have his way, all public high school students would be required to take it.

Christopher Miller, who led the Pentagon during the chaotic closure of Trump's tenure in Washington, detailed [his vision](#) for the ASVAB and a range of other changes as part of [Project 2025](#), the conservative Heritage Foundation's aspirational government-wide game plan should the presumptive Republican nominee return to the White House. Though Trump has not publicly endorsed its policy proposals, Miller is among a cluster of influential former administration officials and GOP lawmakers who have mused aloud about a [national service mandate](#) and other measures to remedy what they see as a "crisis" facing the all-volunteer military.



Follow Politics

Follow

Trump has been complimentary of Miller's performance during his administration and suggested that, if there is a second term, he might reprise his role as defense secretary, a powerful Cabinet post with sway over Pentagon policy. And though the former president has not weighed in on this Heritage strategy document, he did embrace many of the organization's proposals at the outset of his first term.

In an interview, Miller said a national service requirement should be "strongly considered." He described the concept as a common "rite of passage," one that would create a sense of "shared sacrifice" among America's youth.

"It reinforces the bonds of civility," Miller said. "... Why wouldn't we give that a try?"

Under his plan, he said, the ASVAB would be used to identify potential military "weaknesses" and help plug knowledge gaps as U.S. defense leaders size up competitors like China, and devise plans for possible conflicts with a range of foreign adversaries.

"If we're going to prepare for a great-power competition," Miller said, "it's helpful to have a baseline understanding of the pool of potential military service members and their specific aptitudes prior."

His contribution to Project 2025 also advocates granting military recruiters greater access to secondary schools, and he's proposed halting use of the Defense Department's electronic medical records platform, which he says leads to "unnecessary delays" and "unwarranted rejections" for some people with disabilities or other conditions who otherwise want to serve.

On Tuesday, after publication of this report, Trump wrote on social media that the idea he would call for mandatory military service was "ridiculous" and attacked The Washington Post for what he said was a "failed attempt to damage me with the Voters."

"In fact," he said, "I never even thought of that idea."

Trump's own relationship with the military is complicated. As a teenager, he attended a military academy but later sought deferments to avoid service during the Vietnam War. As president, he embraced the role of commander in chief but routinely clashed with the Pentagon as its leaders balked at many of his impulses and recoiled when claims surfaced that he'd disparaged those killed in combat.

Trump's campaign sought to tamp down speculation about his agenda. In a statement, top advisers cautioned that unless announced by the former president or "an authorized member" of his reelection team, no conjecture about future staffing or policy "should be deemed official."

Spokespeople for the Heritage Foundation did not respond to requests for comment before publication of this article. After it appeared online, a spokesperson said that Project 2025 does not "speak for President Trump or his campaign, who alone set his agenda."

Collectively, the military services fell short of the Pentagon's recruiting goal by about 41,000 last year, officials told lawmakers in December. Only the Marines and the Space Force met their objectives.

In explaining its shortfall, the Army, the largest of the services, points to internal data indicating that most of America's youths — 71 percent — do not qualify for military service for reasons that include obesity, drug use and aptitude.

Only 1 percent of the U.S. population serves in the armed forces, Army data shows.

The United States halted conscription in 1973, two years before the Vietnam War ended, and since then the idea of mandatory military service has remained politically unpopular. But some in the GOP appear willing to make a case for change.

Sen. J.D. Vance (R-Ohio), a potential Trump running mate, said in an interview that he sees a clear need for measures to boost participation. "I like the idea of national service. And I'm not talking about in wartime," he said, calling for more Americans to put "some skin in the game."

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), the onetime Trump confidant who has recently clashed with the former president, suggested that military recruiters need more leeway to work in the country's public schools and said, "I will take no option off the table" when it comes to addressing the shortfalls, including compulsory service.

Rob Hood, a former official in the Trump Defense Department and in the George W. Bush White House, said he thinks 18- to 20-year-olds would benefit from gaining "a better appreciation for how great this country is."

"Who gave them their Social Security numbers? The United States government," Hood said. "There can be the takers and there can be the givers, and once we're all a bunch of takers and there are no givers, this country will collapse."

The Pentagon declined to comment.

To address the military's recruiting shortfall, officials said earlier this year that the Defense Department would lean into marketing that encourages young adults to seize a sense of purpose by joining up and emphasizes the tangible advantages of doing so, including health care and retirement benefits.

Mackenzie Eaglen, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, characterized the Pentagon's posture as "treading water." Military leaders, she said, are "throwing everything at the wall in the hope that good ideas will stick." While it's evident that more must be done, she said, "I still don't see that as enough to make the case for Congress to direct mandatory service on to America's youth."

What could change lawmakers' calculus? Pressure from the White House, Eaglen said.

Yet often in polarized Washington, consensus is hit or miss. Last year, for instance, Congress agreed to provide military recruiters with greater access to high school and college campuses. A "Draft Our Daughters" provision that would require all 18-year-old women to register with the Selective Service has been mired in debate for years.

The specter of a national service requirement, said Sen. John Hickenlooper (D-Colo.), “strikes me as un-American.” He called such Republican proposals “strange,” before adding, “But there are an awful lot of things they’re doing that seem strange to me.”

Mandating the ASVAB at public high schools could represent a middle ground. Although neither state nor federal law requires that students take the exam, some schools already make students sit for the assessment.

The U.S. Military Entrance Processing Command, in response to a Freedom of Information Act request about a decade ago, disclosed that more than 900 schools across the nation reported mandating the test. Defense Department officials declined a request for current figures.

Liberty-Eylau, in Texarkana, was among the schools identified in that list as not requiring the ASVAB. In a brief interview, the school’s assistant principal, LaTasha Harris, confirmed that all seniors at the school are asked to take the test. “All of them can take it on one day,” she said. Harris did not respond when contacted with additional questions, nor did other school administrators.

When Rousseau returned home from school after taking the ASVAB, she told her mother, Laura Rousseau, that the school had forced her to take a military test. “I don’t want to fight in a war,” she said.

Laura Rousseau said she wants her daughter to decide her future and does not want the military to interfere. “I feel like they’re trying to make it easier to just draft the kids,” she added.

More than 1,000 miles away, in southwest Pennsylvania, a 15-year-old student at Connellsville Area Senior High School wore an oversize military jacket, its sleeves drooping past his hands, and pants with legs so long they dragged on the floor.

All sophomores here are required to take the military aptitude test, said Joseph P. Walsh, a retired Army officer and the school’s Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (JROTC) instructor. He said he uses the results to advise students to consider specific military jobs.

Walsh called the program an opportunity for those who may not be able to afford advanced education or qualify for well-paying employment after high school. He said JROTC awarded three Connellsville students more than \$1 million in scholarships last year, which he has used as a selling point to attract others.

“I get a lot of kids that came from nothing,” Walsh said, “so job security is important.”

At least one teacher at Connellsville High criticized the military presence. David Hartz, who has taught at the school for nearly 30 years, said mandating military testing feels “Big Brother-y” and deceives students into believing they have less of a choice about their futures. Hartz said he is not anti-military, but believes students should be able to choose whether they take the test.

A Rand study published in 2017 found that low-income areas are disproportionately targeted by military recruiters. A separate Rand report, published in April, suggests that incidents of misconduct by recruiters have shaped the impressions of some parents and school administrators, who fear they “might endanger students or take advantage of those too young to understand the commitment of enlistment.”

A national service requirement, Miller contends, would afford young people from across the country the opportunity to learn about and rely on one another. He and other advocates on the political right say they believe the United States is losing its civil cohesion and view this as a solution.

“We don’t have a mechanism now in our society,” Miller said, “that leavens everyone, and provides a common focus and a common vision.”

Hannah Knowles contributed to this report.