**April 6, 2023 / Uncle Sam really wants you**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

*SCORING - “BE ALL YOU CAN BE” THEME*

NOEL KING (HOST): The U.S. Army recently resurrected a recruiting slogan that first appeared in 1981.. Because that campaign seemed to work back then.

*<CLIP> U.S. Army T.V. Advertisement, 1981:*

*<<theme music>>*

*NARRATION:We do more before 9:00am than most people do all day.*

*<<theme music: “Be all that you can be”>>*

*SOLDIER: Hey First Sergeant! Good morning!*

Some of the recent ads even featured a celebrity, Jonathan Majors, but they had to be pulled after…

*<CLIP> CBS NEWS: The Creed Three star was arrested in New York City on charges of strangulation, assault and harassment after an alleged domestic dispute with a 30 year old woman.*

SCORING IN <8 Leg Down NO CRACKLE - BMC>

Young people overwhelmingly do not want to join the army.

*<CLIP> Kate Kusminzki, CNAS: the Army put out statistics that indicate that only 9% of American youth are even interested in military service.*

And the army does not want a lot of the young people. So…. what’s going to give?

That’s coming up on Today, Explained.

**[THEME]**

NOEL: It’s Today, Explained. I’m Noel King. Tell me who you are?

KATE KUZMINSKI (CNAS): I'm Kate Kuzminski, I am a senior fellow and the director of the Military Veterans and Society Program at the Center for a New American Security, where I focus on military personnel policy.

KATE: So the recruiting landscape is a bit challenging for the Army and for all of the services. Last year, at the end of the fiscal year, which ended on September 30th, the Army was short about 15,000 soldiers, which was about 25% of the goal that they were after for last fiscal year.

NOEL: How many people are currently in the Army?

KATE: The total Army, the active Reserve and National Guard are approximately 1 million strong.

NOEL: Huh!

KATE: The majority of those are in the active component, which is about 475,000.

NOEL: 475,000. Okay, so the Army misses its recruiting goal by 15,000 last fiscal year. That sort of seems like a drop in the bucket. Are those 15,000 people who did not sign up, are they replacing 15,000 active duty service members who retired, or is the Army getting bigger? What's happening?

KATE: They are replacing those who have left the service, whether through retirement or after serving one or two terms of enlistment. Congress sets a cap, which is known as the end strength, and each year that is the total amount that the services are allowed to have. So the services project to replace each person who leaves to meet that cap. The services have flexibility within that to set their number. Now, the incentive is to meet that end strength but the services could decide that they want fewer than Congress sets [as] the cap.

NOEL: What are the reasons that the army is missing its recruiting goals?

KATE: There's two challenges. So on the one hand, there's eligibility challenges. Approximately 30% of American youth, and that's a generous number, are eligible for military service…

*<CLIP> TODAY SHOW: A recent Pentagon study found that 23% of young Americans are qualified, down from 29% in recent years. Part of the reason… obesity and drug use.*

KATE: things like medical, physical fitness, moral fitness and academic and intellectual fitness.

*<CLIP> ONE DETROIT:*

*U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. James McConville: We have an academic test that recruits are required to take, and it used to be two thirds passed, now only one third pass.*

KATE: And then there's also propensity, which is an individual's interest or willingness to serve.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK USER YCNASNDTF\_IMBACK: First and foremost, I don’t think there’s enough support given after you serve your time. The department of veterans affairs estimated that there are about 100,000 veterans that are homeless any given night.*

KATE: We've seen that decrease over time. And the Army put out statistics that indicate that only 9% of American youth are even interested in military service.

*<CLIP> So you’re telling me I can make more money being a plumber than going to go risk my life fighting in a war that I didn’t even start?*

NOEL: What is moral fitness?

KATE: We have seen an increase in justice involvement among American youth, so those who have gotten into trouble for some type of misdemeanor, or even felony, and also some some complicated factors with respect to the fact that different states have different laws regarding the use of marijuana. So it might be something that's legal at the state level, but isn't legal at the federal level and can be disqualifying for military service.

NOEL: If I am busted in high school for smoking weed, you know, out behind the gym and I get in trouble with the school principal, but I'm not referred to the police. It's just, you know, it's an internal matter. Would that prevent me from getting into the army?

KATE: It could raise a flag for your recruiter. Yes.

NOEL: Wow! Okay, so. So you said physical fitness. Moral fitness. What was the third one you mentioned?

KATE: Medical conditions. So that's something that we've seen change over time. Parents are more likely to enroll their their children in some sort of counseling or medical intervention for things like ADHD at rates that we didn't necessarily see 20 or 30 years ago.

*<CLIP> SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE:*

*Sen. Tom Cotton R-AR: I and almost everyone else on this committee could tell you a story about what we had to do to help some outstanding young man or woman overcome some supposedly disqualifying injury or condition. Maybe a 14 year old kid got prescribed a mind altering drug for depression when his parents were going through a divorce and 5 years later he’s had no indication whatsoever.*

KATE: The fact that individuals have a medical history where perhaps they've been prescribed Adderall… and that can be disqualifying for military service as well.

NOEL: Wow. It almost sounds like the recruitment process is out of step with the times, frankly.

KATE: So it's challenging because on the one hand, you do need individuals who are capable of meeting military requirements. The military, as you would expect, can be a really high paced and stressful environment. And at the same time, trying to align the standards with where where the general population is at, is important.

NOEL: You also said that … willingness to enroll in the Army seems to be declining.

KATE: Department of Defense traces survey data for 16 to 24 year olds to get a sense of what military service or the appeal of military service is to American youth. We have seen this decrease in the propensity to serve, part of that has to do with the lack of interaction that we have that most Americans have with today's military.

*SCORING Basic Barbara*

KATE: 50 years ago in July of 1973, we transitioned the entire military from one that was mostly drafted to a more professional all volunteer force, or an all recruited force.

*<CLIP> The MacNeil/Lehrer Report, 1977:*

*Robert MacNeil: Ever since Congress abolished the draft, four years ago, the Armed Forces have been spending millions of dollars to attract recruits to the all-volunteer services. Military service is no longer depicted as a patriotic sacrifice, but a desirable, even exclusive career.*

KATE: And in that period of time, the military also shrank because there were different requirements. We certainly didn't need a military that was as large as we saw in World War Two. And so over time, there are fewer and fewer veterans in the general population and people's communities. We also see the alignment of where bases are. They're mostly concentrated in the south, and even when they're not in the south, they tend to be in more remote areas. So there's little interaction between the general population and those who are currently serving. We also see a shift over time in parents' beliefs about what a successful next step after high school is. So the perceived marker of success now, is going immediately from high school into college. And so that can be challenging for the military services when they're trying to recruit because they are competing with colleges and universities as opposed to the message being it can be military service and education or military service and then education as opposed to military service instead of an education.

*SCORING OUT*

NOEL: Let's say let's say, Kate, that the worst, worst case scenario happens this year and the Army again misses their recruiting mark by 15,000 recruits. The U.S. will still have over 400,000 soldiers. Can we really not get by with that many? We have a very, very large army. Why does the army need to be that big?

KATE: you know, the Army has to be prepared to operate in any environment that, you know, could potentially include the war in Russia and Ukraine, contingencies in in the Indo-Pacific region. And so they're really thinking through how do we meet the absolute requirements that we have to keep the nation safe.

*SCORING IN Wavelengths, APM Library*

KATE: The United States military, each of the services are a closed promotion system. So essentially, the individuals that you have bringing in today many careers last 20 years, which is when retirement kicks in, though, there are people who serve longer than that. So if we look at our general officer corps, many of them have served about 26 to 28 years before they become a general officer. And because it's a closed hiring system, we can't laterally bring in good leadership 20 years down the road from a different career path. We have to grow them internally in the military. If the services miss their recruiting targets today, there are long term effects on who becomes the leadership in those services.

NOEL: Coming up on Today, Explained, we ask the Secretary of the Army about the thing many young people say is keeping them from enlisting: and that is the army’s REPUTATION.

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

NOEL: It’s Today, Explained. Earlier this week, I went with Today, Explained Producer and former U.S. Army Staff Sergeant Victoria Chamberlin to the Pentagon to meet the person who right now, quite possibly, thinks the MOST about the Army’s recruiting problems .

NOEL: Madam Secretary, start by giving me your full name and tell me what you do.

U.S. ARMY SECRETARY CHRISTINE WORMUTH: Christine Elizabeth Wormuth. And I'm the 25th secretary of the Army.

NOEL: You started in this job in the spring of 2021. How much of your time is spent thinking about the challenges of recruitment?

SECRETARY WORMUTH: In the last year, I would say a good bit of my time is spent thinking about recruitment. It's our number one challenge. It's, you know, fundamental to the army. If we are not large enough to do what we need to do for the president and the secretary of defense, that's a big problem. So I would say I spend probably a third of my time focused on it and talking about it and going out and trying to reintroduce the army to the American public.

NOEL: How is that going?

SECRETARY WORMUTH: I think it's going well. I find when I go out and talk to audiences, for example, I gave a speech at a high school in Chicago, and the kinds of reactions I get to me underscore a lot of the findings that we've been getting through our research, which is just there are a lot of young Americans who really don't know very much about the military, much less the United States Army and who I think have a lot of perceptions that that we need to to break through and give them some more ground truth so that they can form new opinions.

NOEL: What are those perceptions? What are you hearing that makes you think, oh, dear, we've got to change the narrative if we want people to enlist?

SECRETARY WORMUTH: The top three obstacles that most young people have when they think about joining the Army is fear of death or injury, fear of psychological harm. So, for example, you know, kids worry about PTSD. They hear and see headlines about suicide, for example, or sexual harassment. And then the third obstacle that a lot of young people have is just fear of leaving friends and family, you know, going away to something unknown. And and I think those you know, I get that kind of feedback when I when I talk to young people. So to me, it bears out a lot of the research that we're getting.

NOEL: Do you think there are some generational shifts here? I remember being in high school 20 plus years ago, and I remember there were kids who went into the army. You didn't hear them talking about PTSD.

SECRETARY WORMUTH: I think that a lot of that is because the last 20 years, the United States military has been at war, you know, in the Middle East, in Afghanistan. You know, while the the number of casualties coming out of those conflicts was much lower, say, than the Vietnam War, there were casualties, nevertheless. There were fatalities and there were people coming back home with traumatic brain injuries from from IEDs, for example. And frankly, there's also you know, there have been a lot of movies about PTSD, things like The Hurt Locker, You know, the great Jennifer Lawrence, who was a fantastic actress, just made a new movie where she is a combat engineer and comes back and is dealing with traumatic brain injury. So so that I think there's been a lot of reinforcement of that messaging over the last 20 years.

NOEL: In a statement to the Associated Press last fall, you warned that if the Army's recruitment numbers don't improve, members of the National Guard and the Army Reserves will be put on active duty. There are around 475,000 active members of the U.S. Army, as I understand it. Why is this so urgent? That's a lot of people and we're not at war.

SECRETARY WORMUTH: I would say a couple of things about that. First of all, the Army is is very, very busy even when we're not at war. So, you know, the Army right now is about 50% of the overall United States military around the world. We are in 140 different countries. You know, so just Europe, for example, right now, 43,000 of the 100,000 odd you know, U.S. military members in Europe are United States Army people. And then we're also in Africa, in Latin America, in the Middle East, for example. You know, we do a lot of exercises and we do a lot of working with the military's of other countries around the world. So we're actually, you know, quite busy on any given day. And, of course, you know, if you have, say, 43,000 soldiers in Europe, you really need to have about a 3 to 1 ratio for every soldier who's deployed, you need to have two back stateside who are either, you know, recovering, if you will, resetting from a deployment, and then another soldier who is training and getting ready to go back overseas and replace those soldiers. And if and if the army, the active army, continues to get a little bit smaller, what we may have to do periodically is call up members of the Guard or the Reserve to essentially substitute for the active duty in some of these overseas deployments. We did that quite a bit during, you know, the 20 years that we were in Iraq and Afghanistan. And I'm just saying that that's a that's an option that we have to help us manage the risk of the active army getting a little smaller.

NOEL: We know that Americans do enlist in the service at times of real national crisis. Right. We saw this after 9/11. We certainly saw this after Pearl Harbor all those years ago. Do you think it takes that kind of crisis to, in a sense, convince people that they should join the army, that they should be in the service? I just wonder if without that sense that America is under attack, for example, you lose the urgency.

SECRETARY WORMUTH: Well, the last thing I would want is to sort of hope for another attack on the homeland to solve our recruiting crisis.

NOEL: Of course.

SECRETARY WORMUTH: And I don't think it requires that. I think the key is what you said is that the is that young Americans need to perceive the dangers to the United States of America as a real threat. You know, I'm I'm a child of the eighties. I grew up during sort of the end of the Cold War. You know, when our enemy was the Soviet Union, I remember, you know, doing nuclear bomb drills under my desk in school. But there was a sense of, you know, the United States has an enemy, needs to protect itself. And when everyone was sort of galvanized against the Soviets, and I think what we need to do is make sure that young people understand that we are once again, I think, facing a very, very dangerous security environment. I mean, I've worked in the national security community for 30 years, and this is the most dangerous security environment I've ever seen. So I think that if we explain that to young Americans, I think it will underscore to them, again, that sense of purpose that is galvanizing, I think, towards military service.

NOEL: What is the threat? It's no longer Soviet Russia. What is it?

SECRETARY WORMUTH: I think it's twofold. One, I think the biggest challenge we have is China, which is a revisionist power, you know, which wants to change the rules, if you will, of the international system in a way that I think is very disadvantageous for democracy. And then, of course, you still have, you know, not communist Russia, but you still have a very acute threat, I think, which is, you know, amply illustrated by Putin deciding that Ukraine doesn't have the right to exist as a nation and going in and invading it. And, you know, again, another major power that wants to change the rules so that basically we go back to a Hobbesian state where, you know, the strong countries do what they can and the weak countries suffer what they must.

NOEL: The Wall Street Journal recently released the results of a poll they have taken asking Americans about a number of things, including how patriotic they are. So Americans, the Wall Street Journal found, are much less patriotic than they were in the 1990s. Patriotism is a very hard thing to define. But do you think a change in values such as patriotism is making people less likely to serve?

SECRETARY WORMUTH: When I saw those numbers, I wondered if part of… I wondered if there were two things happening there. One, there are a lot of polls that show that Americans on, you know, whether they're living in blue states or red states, are losing trust in institutions. You know, and and the military, while we still are a highly trusted institution in an absolute sense, we we have seen a decline in trust in the military as well. And so I wondered if that connected a little bit to the decline in patriotism. And the other thing I wondered about is, you know, I do think there's a very active conversation in our country about about our history, about the legacy of slavery, about systemic racism. You know, there's a lot of discussion about this and there's a lot more focus on the complexity of our national history. You know, I think the conversation around our nation's history is very, very different than the one that I was taught in schools. And I think, you know, I wonder if some young Americans are looking at the totality of our historical record and saying, I'm not proud of everything that the United States has done over the years.And I really want to encourage young people that even as they think about the complexities of our history, to reflect on how much there is to be proud of in this country and hence, I think, remain feeling patriotic about the country.

NOEL: I will give you a piece of data that really surprised me. So as I understand it, the Army conducted a survey of young people asking them for their thoughts about about the military. The results have not been made public, but a summary was provided to the Senate Armed Services Committee. 13% of respondents in that poll, ages 16 to 28, believe that women and minorities in the Army face discrimination. When you hear 13% believe they might face either racial or gender discrimination, what do you think?

SECRETARY WORMUTH: Well, I'm very, very familiar with that poll. And the methodology of the poll is complex. And so it isn't actually that 13% of young people thought that, you know, women and people of color would be discriminated against. But the methodology aside, I think what is notable about that is that that was if you take away the top three reasons why people don't join the military, the things that I talked about before of your death and injury, fear of psychological harm, etc., the next biggest obstacle is feeling like the army will put your life on hold. Somehow, you know, keep you from going to college. And the concern about women discrimination against women and minorities was the third of the next three barriers. So it was a substantial barrier in the minds of some people. And and I think, you know, again, I would imagine that that connects to, you know, news about, you know, the terrible tragedy of the murder of Vanessa Guillen at Fort Hood, for example, or, you know, there are, you know, any number, unfortunately, of stories about sexual harassment and sexual assault in the military. And I think similarly, you know, you… I mean, I remember there was a story here not too long ago of an Army Guardsman was was essentially, you know, assaulted and harassed by some police officers because he was a black person. So I think, you know, when young people hear about those stories, they start thinking about what kind of experience will I have in the United States military.

NOEL: If the Army does not meet its recruiting goals and continues to not meet its recruiting goals, can you envision a future in which the United States must reinstate the draft?

SECRETARY WORMUTH: I don't see us reinstating the draft. I just, you know, a: I think there are many, many reasons why the all volunteer force is superior to a military that's built on the draft. Not to mention, I think that would be, you know, politically extremely unpopular with all sorts of Americans around the country. But I do get concerned. You know, we do need a sufficiently large army to be able to do all of the things that the president needs us to do. So I do think we have got to find a way to reintroduce the the army to the American public and turn around our recruiting challenges. But I don’t… and I think that’s going to take us a few years to do… but I don’t see us going to a draft.

SCORING IN — Vines Unwind - Drum Version

NOEL: Secretary of the Army, Christine Wormuth. Today’s episode was produced by Victoria Chamberlin. It was edited by Matthew Collette and engineered by Paul Robert Mounsey. It was fact-checked by Laura Bullard. I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Explained.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**