



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 43
Issue 2 June

Article 12

2016

Review of *The Rise of the Military Welfare State*. Jennifer Mittelstadt. Reviewed by Mark Olson

Mark Olson

Illinois State University, mdolso2@ilstu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Olson, Mark (2016) "Review of *The Rise of the Military Welfare State*. Jennifer Mittelstadt. Reviewed by Mark Olson," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 43: Iss. 2, Article 12.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.4021>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol43/iss2/12>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

economic functions, primarily providing a sufficient free labor force and a stable social environment for English industry.

This book, based on a comprehensive review of the literature, provides immeasurable value in understanding the origin, features and status of Britain as a welfare state, and in comprehending the emergence, functions and essence of the modern social welfare system. It will be a valuable reference source for research and study in sociology, social welfare and social work, especially as pertains to the history of English social security. As a pioneering systematic study from the perspective of a Chinese scholar, this book should also play a positive role in attracting academic attention and research on this topic in China.

Lin Guo, Huazhong University of Science and Technology

Jennifer Mittelstadt, *The Rise of the Military Welfare State*. Harvard University Press (2015), 344 pages, \$29.95 (hardcover).

Jennifer Mittelstadt's new book reflects the increasing scrutiny of America's military system, offering a timely critique of one of the oldest and largest of military forces, the United States Army. Centering issues of class, race, and gender in her analysis, the author juxtaposes the expansion of military benefits with the retrenchment of social welfare benefits in the civilian sector. Mittelstadt frames her account of the Army's transformation from conscription to an All-Volunteer Force (AVF) as a clash between two dominant institutions: free-market economists promoting unrestrained capitalism, and the "paternalistic and patriarchal" military leadership.

This book documents the expansion of military benefits, such as subsistence allowances and housing and education stipends, with the advent of the AVF. Following the end of the draft in 1973, benefits which had previously been available only to officers and career personnel were extended to junior enlisted members with the goal of enhancing recruitment. Consequently, more than one observer noted the irony of an expanding 'welfare state' within the American Army. Nevertheless, in response to Mittelstadt's query, "Was there a unique relationship between military service and

entitlements?" the answer is, historically, yes.

Throughout the military history of this country and around the world, systems of provisions and entitlements to service members have existed as a means of recruitment, retention, and compensation. In addition to maintaining basic sustenance for individual members (as illustrated in the quote attributed to Napoleon that "An army marches on its stomach"), medical care was provided to the families of servicemen during the Revolutionary War; families of Civil War servicemen received allotments authorized by the Department of Army Regulation; and Relief Societies for the widows and orphans of deceased Army and Navy combatants were created in the early 1900s. During World War II, service members received an unprecedented rate of pay, in addition to allowances for 'Basic Maintenance' provided to their family members. These entitlements may be considered reasonable recompense, a means to cope with the challenges of military life, or demonstration of societal support in times of war, rather than a counterpart to America's traditionally residual welfare system.

It is debatable whether the systems of military benefits, regardless of their expansion or contraction over time, represent a 'welfare state.' The hierarchical nature of the military would seem diametrically opposed to the egalitarian concept of a welfare state, in which citizenship is the primary criterion for eligibility. The extension of military benefits has historically been predicated on obligation. Indeed, service personnel and their families forgo independence and autonomy for lengthy periods in exchange for benefits. This fundamental reality significantly challenges the analogy of the military system to a welfare state. While the author writes critically of the "proposed conditional requirements for receiving government support" (p. 182) stipulated by the welfare reform efforts of the Clinton administration, it must be recognized that benefits for service personnel and their families have always been conditional. At the same time, increases in military spending may be conceptualized as 'welfare' or 'national security,' depending on one's political philosophy and the tenor of the times.

Positing a relationship between Reagan-era cuts in federal grants to low-income college students and the growth in educational benefits and family services for Army

personnel, Mittelstadt argues, “the army family welfare state grew not only despite the cuts to civilian social programs, but also to some degree on their backs” (p. 169). However, this hypothesized cause and effect fails to acknowledge the confluence of political and foreign policy factors that influence defense expenditures. Military budgets are often impacted by foreign policy decisions and global concerns, as indicated by a 2014 report published by the Council on Foreign Relations. Following historical trends in defense spending, spending tended to be related to perceived threats to national security. As a case in point, Reagan came into office pledging to defend the country against an ‘evil empire’ and confront what his administration defined as Soviet aggression. The call for increased defense spending, presented in conjunction with the denigration of civilian social welfare, presented no contradiction for the Reagan administration. Such policies followed a long-established conservative philosophy that was not uncommon among the general public; namely that civilian social welfare and military benefits are not analogous.

While Mittelstadt provides ample documentation of the growth of military benefits and cuts in social welfare, the question remains as to whether these circumstances are truly comparable. The author’s association of Army entitlements with civilian income-maintenance programs suggests a parallel between these two systems generally not endorsed in American culture. Mittelstadt provides only limited evidence to support this assumed equivalence. Likewise, examination of the cultural values that underlie the disparate perceptions of government subsidy recipients is lacking, making the author’s premise seem more of a moral stance than persuasive argument. Still, it must be said that the unprecedented involvement of economists in the initial explorations of the AVF provide a basis for framing this history in terms of competing economic and social welfare theories. *The Rise of the Military Welfare State* depicts the growing influence of free-market theorists during the 1960s, who advocated applying their principles to a number of social institutions, including the military. The participation of Milton Friedman and Alan Greenspan in this regard leads Mittelstadt to suggest that “free market economists succeeded in changing the military” (p. 17). Indeed,

Friedman and Greenspan played pivotal roles in initial discussions of the AVF, and subsequently on the Gates Commission, to address the debate on conscription.

Nonetheless, the author acknowledges that the free-market proponents failed in advancing their view that military service was a job comparable to civilian employment, thereby subject to the 'rules' of the market. This may explain the diminished presence of the economists once the book's focus shifts to the Army's transition to the volunteer era; after the conclusion of the Gates Commission, their influence was not particularly significant. Additionally, it is questionable that the opposition of military leadership to the application of free-market theories was primarily 'paternalistic,' as the author suggests, rather than rooted in the realities of military function and culture.

The free-market theorists return at the end of the book as Mittelstadt documents the trend toward 'privatization,' with the contracting out of military services during the Clinton administration. While this is presented as the eventual triumph of Friedman et al., it can alternatively be viewed as one in a series of expansions, contractions, and the general shifts in military spending that accompany social and geopolitical change. Ultimately, there is little empirical or historical evidence to suggest that the Army can be accurately characterized as either a business or welfare state, making the author's comparisons in this regard problematic.

In the book's introduction, Mittelstadt notes, "The book that follows does not comprehensively document every [Army] program and benefit ... Instead, it follows the people, programs, issues, and ideas that the evidence suggested were most important in shaping the army's construction and conception of its social welfare apparatus" (p. 15). In the end, *The Rise of the Military Welfare State* offers an insightful account of the culture of the United States Army, and its often uneasy transition to an all-volunteer force. While Mittelstadt's parallels between military benefits and civilian welfare are not always convincing, the author provides a well-researched and meticulously documented account of the historical shifts in military entitlements, set against the context of social and political change.

Mark Olson, Illinois State University