

**Family Matters: The United States Army,
Family, and the Search for Stability
1980-1984**

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Abstract: This paper looks at the United States Army's evolving policy toward families during the period 1980-1984. It argues that the Army of the early 1980s was in crisis, brought on by questions about the Army's role in post-Vietnam America. In 1980, a grassroots movement of Army wives succeeded in their goal of changing Army policy. That policy, outlined in the 1983 *White Paper on the Army Family*, by General John A. Wickham, Jr., fundamentally changed the relationship between the Army and family members.

Keywords: United States Army, Military Families, Grassroots Activism, Military Policy, All-Volunteer Force.

Family Matters: The United States Army, Family, and the Search for Stability, 1980-1984

General Edward C. “Shy” Meyer, like a chubby kid nicknamed “slim,” was anything but. Meyer was an opinionated man, sometimes garrulously so, but he was often incisive when it came to military matters. In 1983, at the end of his four-year tour as Chief of Staff of the Army, the Washington press corps invited him to an exit interview. They hoped he would offer some candid insights into the state of the institution he had served for more than thirty years. “Shy” Meyer, not one to disappoint, levied a ringing indictment: “If we were trying to convince an enemy that we were able to go to war with a system that works like [ours], he would laugh.”¹

At the dawn of the 1980s, as the Army struggled to find an identity, many wondered if this grand volunteer experiment had failed. Meyer’s four years as Chief of Staff were some of the most tumultuous since the military ended conscription and ushered in the era of the All-Volunteer Force (AFV).² Policymakers in Washington, and Americans across the country pondered the Army’s role in post-Vietnam America, its ability to recruit able-bodied and mentally qualified personnel, and its ability to function as a fighting force.³

¹ Quoted in Richard Halloran, “Farewell Call to Nation on Armed Forces Policy,” *New York Times*, (17 June 1983); B6.

² Amid calls from President Jimmy Carter and Congress to cut the defense budget, General Meyer revealed that six of the Army’s ten divisions were undermanned, ill equipped, and unfit for combat. On Meyer’s opinion of the “hollow Army,” see George C. Wilson, “Joint Chiefs of Staff Break With Carter On Budget Planning for Defense Needs; Joint Chiefs Break with Carter on Defense Budget,” *Washington Post*, (30 May 1980); A1; John K. Cooley, “Will US Army Reforms Whip Forces Into Fighting Trim?” *Christian Science Monitor*, (8 September 1980); 5; Allan J. Mayer, David C. Martin, and John J. Lindsay, “Is America Strong Enough?” *Newsweek*, (27 October 1980); 48. See also, Beth Bailey, *America’s Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009); 88-129.

³ On the Army’s role in America, see David Cortright, “Our Volunteer Army: Can a Democracy Stand It?” *The Nation*, (16 October 1976), 357-361. In 1980, the Army discovered that for several years its aptitude test, the Armed Forces Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), had been scored improperly (“misnorming”), thus allowing a flood of

Service-members and their families struggled with serious bread-and-butter issues that stemmed, in part, from the uncertain and fragile state of the Army. To Army families, discussions about the Army's role in America were abstractions that paled in comparison to their daily struggle. For those living in the Army's nadir, change couldn't come fast enough. Beginning in 1980, Army wives organized annual worldwide symposiums in order to give families a chance to voice their concerns, communicate them to the Army, and demand results. Drawing on second-wave feminist discourse, Army wives challenged the Army to meet their needs, as wives and as members of the Army community. In the symposia, Army wives employed grassroots methods that were activist in nature, local in scope, and couched their demands in terms of rights, echoing the women's rights movements of the 1970s.

At the same time, in the late-1970s and early 1980s the idea of the "traditional" family was under debate. In part, this discussion centered on economic decline that made single-income (i.e., male-breadwinner) family patterns increasingly difficult. But second-wave feminism in the 1970s also drew attention; women's demands for a life outside of the home contributed to a growing anxiety over the status of the family.⁴ Anxiety precipitated a backlash toward the women's rights movements that conservatives believed undermined the family.⁵ In 1980, Ronald Reagan tapped into these anxieties,

unqualified recruits into the service (a problem that resuscitated the specter of Robert McNamara's Vietnam-era Project 100,000). For the effects of ASVAB misnorming, see Janice H. Laurence and Peter F. Ramsberger, *Low-Aptitude Men in the Military: Who Profits, Who Pays?* (New York: Praeger, 1991). The botched attempt by US Special Forces to rescue 148 hostages being held in Iran — in which eight Delta Force members were killed, and five were wounded— led many Americans to question the Army's fighting ability. See Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, & US Interests in the Middle East Since 1945*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); 212-214

⁴ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, (New York: Viking, 2005), 263-280.

⁵ An excellent example is the movement to stop the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) from being ratified. See Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

deploying a narrative of familial rebirth and regeneration to capture the White House: strengthen the family; strengthen the nation.⁶

In 1983, drawing on feedback from the Army wives' symposia, the new Chief of Staff of the Army, General John A. Wickham, Jr., wrote the *White Paper on the Army Family*, a provocative mission statement that fundamentally reoriented the Army's policy toward families. General Wickham acknowledged women's activism, but he took their demands, along with the institutional needs of the Army, and wrapped them in a discourse of strengthening families. Squaring off against the ambivalence that characterized the Army's treatment of families, General Wickham sought to reinterpret the Army's history and infuse it with a new philosophy. He argued that a partnership existed between the Army and families. He believed that the Army was an institution, not merely an occupation, saying, "Members take an oath of service to the Nation and Army, rather than simply accept a job."⁷ The Army had a moral and ethical obligation to family members, and they in turn had an obligation to the institution. At a time when the Army needed stability, families and community provided Wickham with a focal point to strengthen his institution. Although the *White Paper* deployed a secular moral rhetoric rooted in the obligations of citizenship and the social contract, the language of reinforcing values and strengthening families resonated in a culture anxious about their decline.

The *White Paper* fundamentally changed Army's relationship to families, but for what purpose? Who benefited from this new arrangement? Cynthia Enloe, a feminist scholar who studies military families, argues that in positioning itself as a caretaker to

⁶ Steven Mintz and Susan Kellog, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life*, (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 203-237; Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968-1980*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 18-19.

⁷ John A. Wickham, Jr. "White Paper 1983: The Army Family," (15 August 1983) Office of the Army Chief of Staff, Washington, DC, iii. Referred to hereafter as "The White Paper."

women, the military fulfilled an institutional need. Enloe cautions us to be wary of the “humdrum forms” that the militarization of women’s lives can take: incrementally, the military strengthened its control over its members through dependence.⁸ The militarization of women’s lives both reinscribed patriarchal power and further entrenched militarism in society.⁹ Enloe’s views are echoed in Josh Goldstein’s influential book on war, gender, and militarism. Goldstein argues that a woman’s role within a family as wife, mother, and caretaker reinforces a soldiers’ masculinity. He writes, “The moral support of family and friends...wives and girlfriends, helps keep soldiers going.”¹⁰ In Goldstein’s interpretation, the “war system” strengthens and stabilizes all gender roles.

These scholars’ insights provide a useful theoretical framework for examining the relationship between the military and those who depend upon it for their basic survival—a paycheck, housing, healthcare, etc. However, the relationship between families and the Army gets more complicated when we look at how policies are conceived, developed, and implemented. Stepping away from reductionist arguments that focus on the maintenance of structures of power, while still acknowledging that these structures exist, I argue that the Army’s policies and actions were informed, shaped, and contested on a terrain where the Army rarely held the upper hand. This paper takes into account just how fragile the Army was, barely a decade after the devastation of the Vietnam War. Women demanded change at a moment when the Army was searching for direction. It considers economic conditions of the late 1970s and early ’80s and their impact on Army families. At the time, women may have invited militarization into their

⁸ Cynthia Enloe. *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); 3, 293.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Joshua Goldstein. *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); 304,410.

lives, but they did so to escape the equally powerless position of poverty and to reassert control over their lives and the lives of their families.

“The Army is Not in The Marriage Business”

The 1970s were tough times. Increased global competition, the decline of US industry, the oil crisis, and stagflation all left Americans struggling to pick up the pieces to a nation in tatters after a lost war in Southeast Asia and the resignation of a disgraced president. The Army figured prominently in America’s debate over its place in the world. A headline proclaiming “GI’s On The Dole” served as an exclamation point in the narrative of a nation in decline.¹¹ As the economic turmoil of the 1970s continued unabated, soldiers’ pay lagged behind both inflation and what civilians were taking home. By 1980, the average service-members real income had dropped fifteen percent. On top of declining buying- power, soldiers coped with on-base housing shortages, inadequate allowances for off-base homes, and a general decline in value of their so-called “fringe” benefits—such as the GI Bill and medical care.¹²

While stateside the Army admitted that as many as a third of first-term enlistees at one base, Ft. Bragg, N.C., lived in sub-standard housing, problems only compounded for those serving overseas. The declining value of the dollar in Germany pushed many Army families to the brink. One Army specialist, Jeanette Adeshote, whose monthly income was \$633, \$280 of which went to rent, kept her family going on a diet of beans, rice, and

¹¹ Steven Strasser and Timothy M. Nater, “West Germany: GI’s on the Dole,” *Newsweek*, (20 March 1978), 52.

¹² Tom Morganthau, David C. Martin, and Michael Reese, “GI Joe Can’t Make Ends Meet,” *Newsweek*, (31 March 1980), 31.

sardines.¹³ Soldiers and their families took to moonlighting at fast-food restaurants or as baggers at the base PX. Others applied for food stamps. To combat the rise in Army poverty, officers' wives clubs and Army social workers opened food pantries to distribute necessities like noodles, baby formula, and extra clothing for children. Some base commanders opened their mess halls to families with kids. Clearly, the Army lacked a coherent strategy for handling the rising number of soldiers with families. One young personnel officer, Capt. Paula Scott, summed up the Army's position bluntly: "The Army is not in the baby business; it's not in the marriage business."¹⁴

Army policymakers felt that they were not in the business of families, but soldiers were busy starting them. Prior to and during the Vietnam War, around forty percent of all soldiers were married. After 1973, that percentage jumped above fifty percent and continued to rise so that by 1985, for example, fifty-eight percent of enlisted personnel and seventy-nine percent of officers were married. Soldiers during the 1970s and 1980s were also getting married sooner and bearing more children faster than their civilian counterparts. By 1983, there were 1,082,000 family members living alongside 780,000 active Army soldiers.¹⁵

Although demographic trends in Army family formation were slightly different from the general public, they shared important similarities. According to one study in 1982, which looked at the AFV in both the United States and Canada, "Changing social norms with respect to the family, hastened in large part by the women's movement, changing divorce laws, and economic necessity" had led an increase in both dual-career

¹³ Strasser and Nater, "West Germany: GI's on the Dole," 52.

¹⁴ Quoted in Bernard Weinraub, "Army in Europe Has Family and Housing Problems," *New York Times*, (6 July 1979), A10.

¹⁵ Peter Morrison, Georges Vernez, David Grissmer, and Kevin McCarthy. *Families in the Army: Looking Ahead*; RAND Corporation, Arroyo Center; 1989; Wickham, "The White Paper," 5.

and single-parent families. Noting that these trends were becoming “well established in all Western, industrialized countries and are represented, also, within the military institution,” the study concluded that the needs of these families were quite different from “traditional” families of the past.¹⁶

With all that was wrong with the Army in the 1980s, one could argue that the Army’s biggest problem was families. In 1983, more than 340,000 soldiers were married, and more than half of their spouses worked for a living. With more women entering the ranks, many dual-career families were actually “dual-Army” families, so that by 1985, one in ten Army families were headed by parents who both wore the uniform. Single-parent Army families also grew modestly from 39,900 in 1979 to 40,400 in 1985. The growing complexity of Army families created new realities for the Army. When mom *and* dad reported for duty, who was watching the kids? Below the surface of the debate over the Army’s direction, family matters were slipping through the cracks.¹⁷

Wives’ frustration with the Army reached a boiling point in the 1980. As one military social worker put it, “You get a lot of women saying, ‘I’m only a dependent,’ putting themselves down like that. When she tries to do something—hold a job, further

¹⁶ Franklin C. Pinch, “Military Manpower and Social Change: Assessing the Institutional Fit,” *Armed Forces and Society*,” Vol. 8 No. 4 (Summer 1982), 584. For a broader view of changes in marriage and family formation, see Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, (New York: Viking, 2005), 247-315. Coontz argues there are four major reasons for the late-20th century transformation in marriage and family formation: Cultural changes in the 1960s and ’70s, the erasure of the legal distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children, women in the workforce, and the sexual revolution. By the 1980s, these forces converged to create a “perfect storm,” and irreversibly changing family patterns (262). See also Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life*, (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 203-237.

¹⁷ Morrison, et al., *Families in the Army*; Wickham, “The White Paper.”

her education—it's difficult... resentment builds.”¹⁸ When women tried to get help on their own, they met an Army bureaucracy that was nonresponsive and at times, callous. One woman, the German-born wife of an Air Force sergeant, went to the base psychiatrist complaining about being depressed. The psychiatrist “gave [her] some Valium and told [her] to get a job.”¹⁹

Sometimes women coalesced and advocated on a particular issue. One group that enjoyed remarkable success was the ExPartners of Servicemen for Equality (EXPOSE). Formed in May 1980, EXPOSE already boasted more than 2,000 members nationwide by 1981. EXPOSE successfully lobbied Congress to pass the Uniformed Services Former Spouse Protection Act (USFPA) in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision in *McCarty v. McCarty*, which ruled that ex-wives were not entitled to their spouse's retirement benefits in divorce proceedings. The passage of USFPA allowed each state to decide whether spouses could sue for retirement benefits.²⁰

In June 1980, the Army Officers Wives Club of the Greater Washington Area (AOWCGWA) sent out a call for delegates to attend a symposium on the Army family. An Army-wide symposium had been a goal of the AOWCGWA since its inception in 1974. The invitation was sent to every Army wives club in the world, every brigade commander, and every chaplain's office. Some 200 wives and 150 observers and facilitators paid the \$70 registration fee, which included the cost of the symposium packet, plus “one continental coffee, two lunches, one banquet and coffee breaks,” and

¹⁸ Quoted in Weinraub, “Army in Europe.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ “Divorce and Military Pensions,” *New York Times*, (7 August 1981), B4.

converged on Washington, D.C. in October, to participate in “a safe platform for the identification and discussion of issues facing the Army family 1980.”²¹

Over the course of the two-day symposium, Army wives identified thirteen areas for improvement. Most importantly, the wives wanted to make the lines of communication between families and the chain of command more uniform and reciprocal. Communication was “informal and often fragmented,” leaving wives feeling “abandoned and powerless to participate in those decisions which affect[ed] their lives.”²² A major point of contention was the frequent relocations that the Army required of its personnel. While they conceded that mobility was a necessary part of life in the military, wives demanded more power to participate in the decision-making process. They proposed that the Army give them a six-month notice prior to relocation, and a modest increase in financial compensation for moving expenses. Because of Army mobility, wives had to frequently terminate employment, pull their kids out of school, and sever already tenuous ties to social support networks each time their husbands changed duty stations. They requested the creation of “job opportunity centers” to provide job counseling and an on-base liaison who could cultivate career opportunities in the surrounding community.²³

A wife’s role in the military was often an extension of her husband’s rank. Army life required women to sacrifice their needs and desires for the demands of the Army. Feeling like second-class citizens, the delegates explicitly demanded more control over their lives. Echoing the social transformations of the 1970s, specifically the changes in women’s roles, they wrote, “As social, economic and educational roles change for the

²¹ Association of the United States Army and The Army Officers’ Wives Club of the Greater Washington Area, “The Army Family: Analysis and Appraisal; Proceedings of a Symposium,” (11, 12 October 1980) Washington, D.C., iii (referred to hereafter as the “1st Symposium”). Emphasis in the original.

²² “1st Symposium.”

²³ *Ibid.*

American woman, there is an expectation by women that institutions will recognize those changes and address them in a manner which is constructive to both the individual woman and the organization.”²⁴ Wanting to carve out an identity separate from their husbands, the wives demanded that the Army stop referring to them as “dependents,” work towards “increased recognition... that the Army spouse is an individual [and] not an extension of the service member,” and eliminate semiofficial pressure on wives to volunteer for on-base functions.²⁵

In addition to improving communication and increasing control over their lives, the delegates also turned their attention to quality of life issues. They requested improvements to on-base housing and higher allowances for those who lived off base and overseas. They wanted improvements to the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Uniformed Services (CHAMPUS), a hybridized health care system in which military families utilized both military medical facilities and sub-contracted private-sector health services for their healthcare needs. Where and when families received care depended upon the needs and resources of the military, rather than the reverse. This convoluted system resulted in waiting lists for on base care, a lack of stability, and continuity because families rarely saw the same doctor twice. When private-sector doctors either didn’t take CHAMPUS, or when CHAMPUS only covered part of the bill, out-of-pocket expenses made quality care a fiction for many families. Finally, the delegates wanted improvements to on-base childcare facilities. Citing the increase in single parents, dual-military families, and families in which both parents were employed, they requested

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ “1st Symposium,” 10-11.

Army-wide uniformity in childcare services and facilities and subsidies for low-income families.²⁶

The organizers of the first symposium realized that momentum was crucial to achieving concrete objectives. Delegates returned to their communities and held local symposia at major installations, such as Fort Carson, Fort Sill, Fort Meade, Carlisle Barracks, Fort Bragg, and at the American base in Panama. While many wives had a true sense of optimism and a faith in institutional change when they went back to their local communities, a month after the symposium, the wives formed a permanent Family Action Committee. The new committee members knew that the future of the Army Family Program would not come from the top down, but instead, would require more action “generated from the bottom up.”²⁷

The Army’s response to the first symposium was mixed. They created a Family Liaison Office within the Department of the Army, a position staffed by an Army spouse who reported directly to the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Army. This new position guaranteed that spouses’ voices would be heard in meetings pertaining to family issues. They created the Family Life Communication “hotline,” a 1-800 number that spouses could call for support. The Army officially stopped using the term “dependent” in all policy papers, directives, publications, and orders, and instead, replaced that term with “family member” or “spouse.” The Chief of Staff issued a new policy statement supporting the right for a family member to seek employment without adversely affecting their spouse’s duty station, promotion, or command assignment. In other words, as a

²⁶ “1st Symposium,” 14-17.

²⁷ The Family Action Committee, “The Army Family: The Next Step. Report of the Second Annual Army Family Symposium,” (10-11 October 1981), Washington, D.C. (referred to hereafter as the “2nd Symposium”).

matter of policy, spouses were no longer expected to “volunteer” their time to the Army to perform on-base services.²⁸

Yet, the Army had done little to address specific quality of life issues, such as housing, healthcare, and childcare. The Army did nothing to address the delegates’ desire for support in finding meaningful employment. Removing the term “dependent” was meaningless if family members still felt, as one Army wife put it, “like so much extra baggage.”²⁹ In the year following the first symposium, the Army’s approach toward families was piecemeal and lacked the coherence and far-reaching impact of policy.

The Army’s unwillingness to embrace institutional change shaped the objectives of the Second Army Family Symposium. Held in October 1981, again in Washington, D.C., the second symposium focused on grassroots action through training, education, and problem solving. Again, the Family Action Committee underscored their bottom-up strategy: “[Delegates] left... challenged to return home to share their training with both volunteer groups and the official Army structure...Real change begins at the bottom in our local communities and works its way up the chain of command.”³⁰

Although many Army policymakers attended, including the Chief of Staff, the delegates turned their attention inward. While the first symposium was a forum for dialogue between families and the Army, the second symposium focused on training community organizers. The three workshop titles were “Recogniz[ing] and Affirming Our Strengths and Assets,” “Identifying Effective Communication and Leadership Skills,” and “Utilizing Steps in Problem-Solving.” In between workshops, lunchtime and

²⁸ Department of the Army, Office of the Adjutant General, Washington, D.C. 20310. A copy of the order was published in the report on the 2nd Symposium.

²⁹ Quoted in Amelia A. Newcomb, “Army Wives: Finally an Appreciated Sector of Military Life,” *Christian Science Monitor* (22 February 1983), 20.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

banquet speakers gave informative presentations on professional volunteerism, transitioning to the job market, “How to Develop a Successful Grassroots Family Program,” and how to access existing support programs through the Wives’ Associations and the Chaplain’s Corps. Underscoring the wives’ desperate need for career development, “Transitioning into the Job Market” was the most popular presentation, a point the Family Action Committee highlighted several times in their report to the Chief of Staff. According to responses in a survey that the Family Action Committee passed out to the 300 delegates, the overwhelming majority thought the second symposium succeeded in developing skills and providing valuable information. Most felt encouraged and inspired, and most responded ‘yes’ to the question: were they “Grateful to be included?” (Three delegates wrote emphatically in the margins of the survey, “I deserved it!”).³¹

Through the family symposia, women laid the groundwork for institutional change. The wives, who gathered from all over the world in Washington, D.C., demanded uniform and reciprocal lines of communication with Army commanders. They wanted more control over their lives, particularly the right to seek meaningful employment. When the Army decided it was time for a family to move, wives wanted to know when, where, and for how long. They wanted to be treated as partners, not dependents—not like so much extra baggage. They asked for improvements to housing, medical care, and childcare.

The delegates’ demands were not radical: they wanted a stake in the system. One Army wife, and a delegate at the second symposium, remarked, “I’m so happy to know

³¹ *Ibid.*

that the family is beginning to play an integral role in today's Army."³² They continued to organize. In The Third Army Family Symposium, which attracted more than 500 delegates, wives continued to develop the ability of national and local Family Action Committees and Family Liaison Offices to intervene with families to negotiate with local chains of command.³³

The White Paper

By 1983, the grassroots organizing of Army wives had spread throughout the Army's global command channels. Local family advisory groups, through their Family Liaison Offices, worked with local commanders to identify and resolve family problems. In early summer 1983, President Ronald Reagan appointed General John A. Wickham, Jr. to be his next Chief of Staff. General Wickham was a safe choice for the job. Wickham's associates and friends described him as "steady and unflamboyant... personable, but not a back-slapper." Despite his education at West Point and Harvard, former Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger described Wickham as "no scholar... but he's very well read." A devout Christian, Wickham once chided a colonel for swearing during a meeting, and ordered him to "never, never, never" use foul language in front of him again. Those close to Wickham did not think he planned on any major overhauls of Army policy, believing instead that he would chart a steady course. His record underscored his caretaker status: no major doctrines, publications, or manuals bore

³² "2nd Symposium"

³³ Newcomb, "Army Wives."

his name. Other than his “killer instinct” on the squash court, according to Schlesinger, Wickham was as unassuming as a boy scout.³⁴

Yet, immediately after assuming command of the Army, General Wickham went to work on a major review of the Army’s policy toward families. Published just two months after he assumed command, it would be difficult to underestimate the impact that the 1983 *White Paper on the Army Family* had on the Army’s relationship to families. Twenty years later, another Army Chief of Staff called it the “most salient single initiative... with respect to Army families” in the institutions’ history.³⁵ In the *White Paper*, General Wickham assessed the reasons why the Army needed a focused policy. “Once a private matter, [the family] is now an organizational concern. Geographic mobility, changing family structures and the recognition that competition between family and organizational needs can be destructive to both parties...” required action.³⁶

Wickham credited women’s activism as the impetus for change, noting the “political sophistication of Army families that organize at the grassroots level to form self-help and advocacy groups.” He recognized their advocacy as an exponent of the rights consciousness of the recent past, stating “today’s families are also a product of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s.” Citing the civil rights and women’s movement, as well as consumer activism, Wickham argued that families had “internalized the questioning, activist nature of these movements [and have become]

³⁴ “No. 2 Man in Army Picked by President To Be Chief of Staff,” *New York Times* (16 March 1983); A13; B. Drummond Ayres, Jr. “Chief of Staff of the Army,” *New York Times* (12 May 1983); A17; Robert C. Toth, “Role of Religious Faith at Pentagon Raises Questions, Doubts,” *Los Angeles Times* (30 December 1984), A4.

³⁵ Erik K. Shinseki, “The Army Family: A White Paper,” Office of the Chief of Staff of the Army, Washington, D.C. (2003), iii.

³⁶ Wickham, “The White Paper,” 1.

adept at identifying their problems and advocating for their common needs.”³⁷ Wickham realized that “when a tug-of-war occurs between a military family and a military organization, the family usually wins.”³⁸

The *White Paper* touched off a flood of support from around the country. The national headquarters of the Boy Scouts of America sent a letter congratulating General Wickham on “this bold and innovative step.”³⁹ Representative Patricia Schroeder, the Democratic chairwoman of the House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, wrote to the *Army Times* to express her support for Wickham’s “personal commitment” to family matters. General Wickham received dozens of letters of support from legislators, policymakers, members of the clergy, veterans, and the public, many of which Wickham personally responded to warmly.⁴⁰

Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family, an evangelical Christian organization dedicated to promoting “traditional” family values, also took notice. Dobson had become an influential voice on the Christian Right to politicians and policymakers, beginning in the late 1970s, under the Carter Administration. When Ronald Reagan rode into office with the help of a vocal and energized “moral majority,” Dobson’s influence grew. Beginning in 1982, President Reagan appointed Dobson to several advisory positions, including a committee seat in the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Dr. Dobson first met General Wickham in December 1983 while in Washington, D.C. attending the National Prayer Breakfast. Dr. Dobson gave General Wickham a signed copy of his recent book and Wickham gave Dobson a copy of the *White Paper*. Himself

³⁷ Wickham, “The White Paper,” 10.

³⁸ Wickham, “The White Paper,” 14.

³⁹ H. Bruce Ayars to Wickham, (7 September 1984), Papers of John A. Wickham, Jr., Correspondence 1982-1986, Box 1, Folder A; USAMHI, Carlisle, PA.

⁴⁰ Papers of John A. Wickham, Jr., Correspondence 1982-1986, USAMHI.

a born-again Christian, although a self-professed “man of... quiet faith,” Wickham developed a close personal relationship with Dobson. After 1984, Dobson would serve as an advisor on several committees that focused on Army family policy.⁴¹

General Wickham was a man with a strong personal faith in Christianity, although he was no crusader. Wickham frequently rebuffed Dobson’s more overt attempts to inject fundamentalist Christian teachings into Army policy. For example, Focus on the Family produced a film called *Where’s Dad*, in which the importance of fatherhood was discussed in terms of “traditional” values and Christian teachings. General Wickham saw the film as an important tool in his efforts to improve family life, but made the Army edit out all references to Christianity, faith, or spirituality prior to its adoption for circulation. In meetings for the Task Force on Soldiers and Families, whenever Dr. Dobson offered a solution that would implicitly endorse a sectarian counseling service for families, General Wickham would overrule the suggestion as “inappropriate.” According to one scholar on evangelicals and the military, General Wickham was a “Christian *in* the military,” not a “missionary *to* the military.”⁴²

General Wickham’s concern about the stability of families in the Army certainly stemmed in part from his religious faith. Yet, perhaps his own personal experience as a child in a military family also spurred him to action. In an oral history conducted a few years after he retired, Wickham describes how his family was broken up because of his father’s service in World War II. He recounts living with a guardian for a time while his

⁴¹ Anne Loveland, *American Evangelicals and the US Military, 1942-1993*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1996), 275-295; Wickham to Dobson, (2 December 1983) and Dobson to Wickham, (7 December 1983), Papers of John A. Wickham, Jr., Correspondence 1982-1986, Box 3, Folder D. For Dobson’s involvement on Army family policy, see Special Subject Files, Box 51, Task Force on Soldiers and Families, USAMHI.

⁴² Loveland, *American Evangelicals*, 295 (emphasis hers). Loveland was paraphrasing another evangelical Christian military leader: Major General Clay T. Buckingham. For Loveland’s discussion of *Where’s Dad*, see 274-293. For General Wickham overruling religious leaders, see: John A. Wickham Jr., Papers, Special Subject Files, Box 51, Task Force on Soldiers and Families, USAMHI.

father served in the OSS in China and Turkey. Citing a “lack of stability in my personal life,” Wickham said, “The breakup of [my] family was, I think, a factor that influenced me early on in the importance of family programs.”⁴³ General Wickham’s faith and his personal experiences as a child who grew up in a family broken apart by the hardships of military life are crucial to understanding the *White Paper*.

In the *White Paper*, Wickham took the grassroots demands of the Army wives, as well as the needs of the Army, and made them a moral imperative. In the opening paragraphs of the *White Paper*, he wrote, “As an institution, the Army has moral and ethical obligations to those who serve and their families.” These words were more than just opening theatrics; the 26-page document is steeped in morality. In Wickham’s estimation, the Army was more than a job, it was an institution charged with defending the nation. “The nature of the commitment of the servicemember dictates to the Army a moral obligation to support their families.” He grounded these reciprocal obligations in the social contract: “The impact at the societal level is our American tradition of blending the responsibility of each individual for his/her welfare and the obligations of the community to its members.”⁴⁴ While the All-Volunteer Force was driven by market principles and its creators had rejected moralistic arguments rooted in the rights and obligations of citizenship, in the *White Paper* General Wickham called on the power of these older verities.⁴⁵ Importantly, General Wickham deployed a secular moral rhetoric grounded in the rights and obligations of citizenship and the social contract. While Wickham speaks at length about civil rights and the women’s movement, missing from

⁴³ Interview with General John A. Wickham, Jr., interviewed by Lieutenant Colonel Jose M. Alvarez, US Army Military History Institute, Senior Officer Oral History Program, Project, 1991-1, 1-2, USAMHI.

⁴⁴ Wickham, “The White Paper,” 12.

⁴⁵ Bailey, *America’s Army*, 32-33.

the document are references to god, faith, or Christian values. Yet, Wickham's words struck a chord with those in the faith community worried about the decline of the family in America.

The balance between the rights and obligations of citizenship compelled the Army to renew its commitment to strengthening families. To join the Army was to enter into an unlimited liability contract: a life and death bargain. Soldiers' commitment to that obligation—"their willingness to not only train, but to deploy and, if necessary, to fight" and die—mandated "corresponding obligations of support for Army families." Wickham argued, "Such commitment is best engendered if soldiers view the Army as a total institution with a high purpose—a fraternal organization where the welfare of its members has a high value."

This is precisely the language that concerns feminist scholars, but these discursive nuances are what render the *White Paper* intelligible. "Soldiers and their families gain through the Army a sense of common identity. They come to view the Army as providing for their total basic needs in exchange for total commitment."⁴⁶ The reciprocity of that statement was implied, although here Wickham made the connection explicitly: "In fostering interdependence between the family and the Army, we are again looking at the Army as an institution...It is not a we/they situation, it is us-- US as in U.S. Army."⁴⁷ To General Wickham, the Army *was* family. The foundation of the Army family, Wickham concluded, rested on the guaranteeing wellness and nurturing a sense of community.

⁴⁶ Wickham, "The White Paper," 13.

⁴⁷ "The White Paper," iii.

Conclusion: The Year of the Army Family

The *White Paper* took the goals of wellness, partnership, and community and provided a concrete mechanism for achieving those goals through policy. Realizing that disparate agencies were executing incongruent policies, General Wickham ordered the development of the Army Family Action Plan (AFAP). “[The AFAP] is the instrument which provides the means to make the transition from the present to the 1990s and beyond.” The AFAP identified sixty-five “issue areas” that affected wellness, partnership, and community. Sixty of the issues were broken down into the four major themes of relocation, medical, family support and role identity, and education and youth. These themes were taken nearly verbatim from the agenda of the first Army Family Symposium in 1980. The remaining five issues created mechanisms to implement the other sixty. Finally, these themes were further broken down into a cost-benefit and timeline matrix.⁴⁸

The AFAP implemented several immediate changes. Families would now be consulted on the design, construction, and maintenance of on base housing. The enforcement of housing quality standards was taken away from local commanders and centralized. Building upon the gains of the family symposia, which won women the right not to have to “volunteer” for Army activities without fear of adversely affecting their spouse’s careers, the AFAP created several methods for providing compensation for those who chose to volunteer. It improved access to educational resources for family members. It required leadership and training doctrines to be updated and taught to all

⁴⁸ “The Army Family Action Plan,” Community and Family Policy Division, Human Resources Development Directorate, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Washington, D.C. (8 January 1984).

Army personnel. Finally, the AFAP created a system of accountability, requiring issue areas to have timelines for progress and completion, and it placed a Department of the Army-level agent at its head. It mandated annual conferences at major installations where families could voice their concerns. According to the Army's website, as of 2008, 589 issues have been taken up by the AFAP. These issue areas have resulted in 95 changes to legislation, 137 changes to Army policy, and 153 improvements to Army programs and services.⁴⁹

Anticipating the release of the Army Family Action Plan, 1984 was declared "The Year of the Army Family," a year dedicated to forging the new partnership between the Army and families. While the *White Paper* crystallized the elusive goals of wellbeing, partnership, and community into a coherent policy, it was certainly no panacea for all of the struggles facing military families. Although military families continued to gain access to better healthcare, more affordable and livable housing, more access to childcare, and a higher standard of living, the trajectory was not one of steady progress. The "Reagan recession" meant tighter belts, even for those wearing olive drab.⁵⁰

One bright spot has been childcare in the Army. Money for the construction of new facilities went from zero dollars in 1980 to \$42,360,000 in 1986. Once a system that was underfunded and understaffed, by the year 2000, 95 percent of Army childcare centers

⁴⁹ Army Family Action Plan. "Does AFAP Work?" Accessed 20 November 2011. http://www.arfp.org/skins/arfp/display.aspx?ModuleID=8cde2e88-3052-448c-893d-d0b4b14b31c4&Action=display_page&ObjectID=9cfaa53a-6153-4c39-8e14-dff127c24c73&AllowSSL=true%2ctrue. See also, "Army Family Action Plan" (1984).

⁵⁰ In 1982, Reagan commissioned the Private Sector Survey on Cost Control, often referred to as "the Grace Commission," after its chairman, J. Peter Grace. Charged with "rooting out" waste in government, the Grace Commission recommended several cuts to the military budget, often to costs directly related to servicemembers' (and their families) welfare. See "Analysis of the Grace Commission's Major Proposals for Cost Control," Congress of the United States, Congressional Budget Office, General Accounting Office (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1984); 27-32.

were accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, compared with a paltry 8 percent accreditation for the nation as a whole.⁵¹

In 1980, a group of Army wives demanded a voice in an institution that controlled much of their lives—where they lived, for how long, and under what conditions. In the Army’s search for an identity—at a time when people questioned its very existence—policymakers forged a partnership with their fastest growing constituency. The creation of the AVF opened the Army’s door to the very demographic, cultural, and social revolutions that transformed America in the 1960s and 1970s; they ignored these changes at their peril. In the early 1980s, the Army’s piecemeal approach to family policy did not evolve into a coherent policy in a vacuum. Army wives began agitating for stability at a time when anxiety over the durability of the family occupied a prominent place in the nation’s discourse. Seeing this, General Wickham fused his institution’s need for direction and wives’ demands for stability with a unifying rhetoric of strengthening families and communities.

By the “Year of the Army Family” in 1984, just four short years after the first Army Family Symposium, the Army had fundamentally reoriented its relationship to families. As a matter of policy, the Army was committed to promoting wellness, developing a sense of community, and strengthening the bonds of partnership with the hundreds of thousands of family members who live among its ranks.

⁵¹ Shinseki, “The White Paper” (2003), 8.