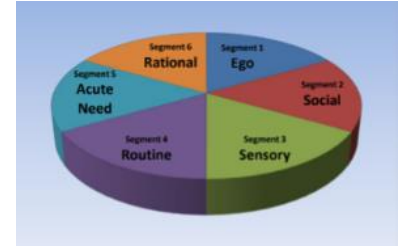


How the Army Went Viral

The evolution behind modern military recruiting.

Since the Revolutionary War the Army has been looking for recruits, people willing to fight and possibly die for their country, people who maybe wanted a better life, or people who simply felt the need, *the want*, to help others. But recruiting is no easy task. Over the years, media, public perception, and generational motivations shaped the evolution of U.S Army recruiting from the iconic “I Want YOU” era to today’s more modern social media era. This evolution reflects a modernization within army recruiting rather than a true strategic shift.



Captain America: The First Avenger. In the beginning of the movie, Steve Rogers—Captain America—finds himself in a movie theater. While watching the previews to the movie, one distinct recruiting strategy comes apparent: film. Military leaders recognized that films were a powerful tool for persuading young men to enlist [1]. Since the Great War, film has been utilized to glamorize combat and, in a way, portray fighting as a way to become heroic to your nation. But films weren’t the only things that screamed patriotism right at the viewer. Posters. Another big recruiting strategy. After the scene where Steve Rogers is in the theater, he ends up going to the ‘Stark Expo’ with his friend Bucky. During Howard Starks’ presentation, Steve looks back at the iconic “I WANT YOU for U.S. ARMY” poster with Uncle Sam pointing directly at the viewer. “The posters were meant to draw out feelings of patriotism and communality among the young men, thereby convincing them to enlist...” [1]. Using this approach in their posters, they began to build national unity rather than a national divide. Young men started to see enlistment as a patriotic duty. Something that—again—could possibly portray them as heroic once enlisted.

The World Wars were decades ago, but that doesn’t mean that the U.S. Army hasn’t been utilizing those same strategies. From the 1980’s-1990’s the Army started the, “Be All You Can Be,” campaign. “...the rousing recruiting jingle popularized during the childhoods of Generation X and millennials returned when the Army adopted the nostalgic marketing campaign for a new generation in 2023,” [2]. After the both the Vietnam War and Covid-19, the Army saw that recruitment numbers started to decrease. This was mostly due to generational motivation. After decades of conflict, both gen X and gen Z became more hesitant to join the military. “Not only is the pool of applicants shrinking, but the perception of military service is also changing negatively...”[3]. After both catastrophes, the Army needed a message that could rebuild trust and appeal to young people who no longer saw military service as a respected path. The “Be All You Can Be,” campaign targeted those who were looking for more and wanted to become a better version of themselves. Although the slogan took root in the 80’s, the campaign has not died out. In one of the U.S. Army’s newer commercials, they say, “You never know what you’re capable of until you take that first step” [4]. The hardest part of joining is deciding where to start. This commercial frames enlistment as a personal transformation. So, although generations over the years have been hesitant to join, the Army notices that hesitancy and reassures the viewer that it is okay to be hesitant because once you make that first step you can become a version of yourself you never once thought possible.

The U.S. Army is not just on the TV, they are also on the ground working with schools, parents, and teenagers. At one school, a teacher of a pilot program had reached out to LT. General Milford Beagle Jr. to see if he would come out and talk to her class, instead he invited them to the base. “For many this is their first exposure to military life beyond what they know from pop culture” which means most teens come in with ideas shaped not just by movies and social media but also by the people who influence their decisions the most such as, parents, teachers, counselors, and coaches [5]. Recruiters know this, which is also why modern campaigns don’t just target the younger generation; they also target the adults who they know are the ones that are truly going to guide them.

But influence alone doesn’t explain why certain messages work better than others. While some may appeal to the TV ads, others may appeal to that in-person outreach. This all comes down to six different segments. Ego, social, sensory, routine, acute need, and rational [6]. They all work together to get one job done: recruit as many willing people as possible. The Army appeals to teens’ desires for purpose and belonging through emotional ads, dramatic visuals, storytelling, and constant visibility in schools, media, and the community. For those with immediate needs, promises of bonuses, training, and job stability are very persuasive. Practical benefits like guaranteed pay, healthcare, and education also help counter those negative perceptions of the military, thus making them more susceptible to the strategies that the Army utilizes for campaigns.

The U.S. Army’s recruitment strategies have evolved over the decades. The modernization of these strategies is apparent through the continued use of film and emotional pulls rather than logical ones. Media, public perception, and generational motivations have caused said strategies to evolve and modernize rather than shift away from the focus of early recruiting as a whole. It is clear that recruiting has and always will be around, and it is clearer than ever that it will continue to evolve within the decades to come, but that doesn’t mean it will shift away from its core intent: to recruit as many as possible, as many willing to become the best version of themselves.

[1] Ryan John Lenzmeier, “For Humanity’s Sake, Enlist: American Military Propaganda in The Great War 1917-1918” (UNCW Digital Collections, December 2015)

[2] Joe Lacdan, “The Army at 250: A look back at the evolution of Army recruiting” (Army News Service, April 2025)

[3] Orly Naum, “Military Recruitment and Retention: A Policy and Practice Analysis” (The University of North Dakota ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, August 2025)

[4] U.S. Army, “First Arrival” (Go.Army, August 2023)

[5] Courtney Kube, “Military Fights to Increase Recruiting, As ‘Outdated Perceptions’ Remain” (NBC News, October 2022)

[6] Wen Chang Fu, “Persuasive Strategies of the United States Military Television Recruitment Advertising During the All-Volunteer Force Era” (Illinois Library, May 2013)

