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For many Americans, it's been a lifetime of war

May 27, 2015

Here's a disconcerting fact: If you turn 18 this year, the United States has been at war for 78.9 percent of your life.

That's according to a startling informational graphic assembled by the Washington Post . It breaks down, based on birth year, what percentage of a person's life has been lived in a time of war. For a baby boomer born in 1950, for example, 43.9 percent of life has been lived while the United States was engaged in a foreign conflict. For a member of Generation X born in 1975, 39 percent of life has been lived during war. For anyone born in 2001 or after, the percentage is 100.

It is remarkable that the United States has been on war footing for 15 years. It is equally remarkable how disconnected the American people have become from the men and women who serve.

Few of today's 18-year-olds will join the military. And despite nonstop American war, few will experience saying goodbye to a friend or family member headed into harm's way. That's because the military, which once united people across various social strata, draws from a much smaller, all-volunteer pool. And perhaps because of that, politicians are willing to send armed forces overseas on a multiplicity of missions.

Consider how different the experience has been among other generations. World War II and Vietnam caused society-wide disruption. The first demanded individual sacrifice and reordered

priorities. The second fueled social upheaval in the form of youth protest and revolt. The war on terror has become nearly familiar, another part of the landscape of current events.

War itself has been redefined – as has the nation’s relationship to it. The 65-year-old who spent 43.9 percent of his life while the country was at war can doubtless share vivid stories about his draft number. The 18-year-old who has spent 78.9 percent of life in a nation at war probably barely remembers the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. War is a fact of life.

As society has been reshaped by technological advancement, economic inequality and political polarization, so has the very idea and understanding of war itself. It is no longer a communitywide effort, a mission to be accomplished and then ended. It has become a perpetual struggle against shadowy foes, an international pursuit of those who can disappear and reappear more nimbly than any organized fighting force.

As New Hampshire swings into another primary season, voters must ask themselves whether they have had enough of military conflict. If they have, they should demand a blueprint for peace that does not require more fighting.

Otherwise, the question becomes: What price will society pay for raising a generation that doesn’t know what it feels like to live without war?