Iraq crisis spurs call for US military draft

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With the Pentagon straining to find troops to confront the popular resistance in Iraq, and over 100 US soldiers killed since the beginning of this month, a senior Republican legislator has called for the reinstitution of the military draft, abolished during the Vietnam War more than 30 years ago.

Senator Chuck Hagel (Republican from Nebraska), appearing on NBC television's "Today Show" on Wednesday, said that mandatory military service had to be considered in the face of what he described as a "generational war against terrorism."

He added that the "middle class" and the "lower middle class" should not be forced to bear the burden of "fighting and dying if, in fact, this is a generational—probably 25-year—war."

Hagel's remarks on the "Today Show" echoed his statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee the day before, when he argued that conscription would force "our citizens to understand the intensity and depth of challenges we face."

Also appearing on the NBC program was Senator Joseph Biden (Democrat from Delaware), like Hagel a ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Biden stated that the US Army was not large enough to occupy Iraq and simultaneously carry out the other US military deployments around the globe. As for a draft, the Democratic senator said conscription was not necessary "now."

Asked about Hagel's proposal at a White House press briefing Wednesday, presidential spokesman Scott McClellan replied that reinstatement of the draft "is not something that's under consideration." He refused to be drawn out by the reporter's follow-up question on whether Bush was ruling out military conscription "categorically."

The public discussion of the draft has been initiated in an atmosphere of mounting crisis over the US occupation of Iraq. At a point where US casualties have reached levels unprecedented since the Vietnam War, the military has extended by three months the tours of duty of some 20,000 US soldiers who were about to return to the US. The order has kept US troop strength in Iraq at 135,000.

At a Pentagon briefing Tuesday, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said that military planners had already devised plans to replace the 20,000 whose tours had been extended, should US commanders determine that they still need 135,000 troops in July. He added that the Pentagon had "thought through" what measures would be taken should even more troops be requested.

The strain on the US military has been compounded by the collapse of much of the Iraqi security force that the Pentagon had hastily trained and deployed. In the face of the mass uprising of the past three weeks, police turned over their stations and weapons to anti-occupation fighters in many towns and, in some cases, joined the insurgency. US-organized Iraqi military units suffered wholesale defections and there was at least one case of mutiny over orders to march on the besieged city of Fallujah.

The fierce fighting has likewise had its impact on the so-called "coalition" assembled by Washington from a relatively small number of pro-US governments. Spain's announcement that it is withdrawing its 1,300 troops has been followed by similar decisions by the governments of Honduras and the Dominican Republic, which together had sent approximately 700 soldiers to Iraq. Poland is broadly hinting that it may withdraw its troops from Iraq in September, when its current commitment expires.

While having little direct impact on US military operations, these withdrawals make it clear that there is very little likelihood that any other countries will send significant forces to relieve the US military burden.

Rumsfeld gave no details as to where the Pentagon

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would find the needed troops in the event that the Iraqi insurgency continues. Most of the military's major combat units have either been deployed to Iraq, have recently left, or are preparing to return. Nearly two thirds of the Army's 500,000 soldiers are already deployed overseas, with US military units operating today in some 130 countries, in addition to fighting the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

To shore up a US military that is strained to its limits, the administration has resorted to drastic measures, including "stop loss" and "stop move" orders. The former bar members of the military from retiring or resigning, subjecting them to forced service. The latter compel troops, like the 20,000 in Iraq, to continue hardship assignments after their tours have ended. Both have had devastating effects on troop morale, raising official concerns that the military will see an exodus of experienced soldiers in the coming months.

While denying that they are even considering a revival of the draft, the Bush administration and the military have been conducting a low-profile recruitment campaign in recent months to staff the country's Selective Service boards with more than 10,000 volunteers. If the draft were reinstated, these boards would have the authority to accept or reject appeals by young men seeking deferments from military service.

Most politicians from both major parties have shied away from discussing a return to the draft during the election year. Until Hagel's statements, however, Democrats had been more vocal than Republicans. The Democrats' presumptive presidential candidate, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, has included in his platform a call for "mandatory public service" by American youth.

In January 2003, Senator Fritz Hollings (Democrat from South Carolina) and Representative Charles Rangel (Democrat from New York) introduced a "Universal National Service Act" that would compel all American citizens and permanent residents aged 18-26 to perform either military or civilian service. At the time, the two issued a joint statement describing themselves as "extraordinarily concerned that our military's current capacity would not allow it to fight multiple wars at once."

Like Hagel, the Democrats posed the reinstitution of the draft as a matter of equity, pointing to the deployment to Iraq of large numbers of National Guard members who had joined the military because of scarce economic resources and the need for tuition assistance. As the Vietnam War demonstrated, however, any introduction of military conscription will inevitably be imposed on the backs of the working class and the poor, while the children of the most privileged social layers find multiple ways to avoid military service.

Within the military itself there are severe misgivings about reviving the Selective Service system. Compelling youth to perform military service against their will in a widely unpopular colonial war, they fear, could quickly create the kind of breakdown of discipline and mutinous mood that nearly destroyed the US Army during the Vietnam War.

Nonetheless, both parties have made it clear that they have no intention of ending the occupation of Iraq. With little prospect of significant forces coming from other countries, and with no indication that popular resistance to the US takeover of Iraq is abating, Washington will inevitably find itself compelled to increase its troop strength there. Under conditions in which the military is already over-extended, the US government, whichever party wins the November election, may conclude it has no choice but to revive the draft in order to maintain the occupation.

The current talk about reviving the draft represents the initial trial balloons, to be followed at some point by a media offensive aimed at depicting conscription as both a patriotic and democratic initiative. Thus, a cynical campaign has begun to dragoon many thousands of American youth, who are to be used as cannon fodder in an illegal colonial war, launched on the basis of lies for predatory aims that have been concealed from the American people.

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