

US election stokes fears of military draft

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In a vote by the House of Representatives last week and a categorical denial by President Bush during Friday's debate with Democratic candidate John Kerry, the Bush administration has sought to allay widespread concern among American young people that it plans to reinstate the military draft after the election.

Reports that the draft will be resumed to meet the manpower requirements for the war in Iraq—and future wars against Iran, Syria, North Korea or other countries—have been circulating widely on the Internet and in the pages of student newspapers on college campuses. Recently the Rock the Vote organization sent out an e-mail to 640,000 young people with a mock draft card and the subject line, “You’ve been drafted,” as part of a campaign to increase voter registration.

According to a poll released last week by the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Center, more than half of young people aged 18 to 29 believe that Bush will reinstate the draft if he is reelected, compared to seven percent who believe Kerry would do so.

These suspicions are only half right. While the Bush administration is being driven towards conscription as the only way to deal with the demands of war in Iraq, a Kerry administration, pledged to essentially the same policy of military victory, will face the same pressures.

The initial political fallout, however, has hit the Republicans hardest, as the actions by congressional Republican leaders last week attest. They called up a bill to reestablish the draft, HR163, introduced by Democrat Charles Rangel of New York, and put it to a vote. It was defeated 402-2, with even Rangel voting against it. Only two congressmen, Democrats John Murtha of Pennsylvania and Fortney Stark of California, voted for it.

The bill was brought to a floor vote out of regular order, with no hearings or testimony. The sole purpose of the exercise was to make a pre-election show of opposition to resumption of the draft—although the gesture may backfire if the next Congress takes the opposite decision.

Congressional Republican leaders admitted they were responding to discussion of the issue on the Internet

among young people. Majority Leader Tom DeLay of Texas said, “After all the conspiracy talk and e-mails flying all over this country, especially the conspiracy talk we’ve heard lately from the Kerry Democrats, we took a look around and found that the only plan to bring back the military draft, secret or not, was the Democrats’. We’re going to bring it out there, and we’re going to put a nail in that coffin.”

Another senior Republican congressman, John McHugh of New York, said Americans “have been whipped into a frenzy by this controversy.” Duncan Hunter of California, the Republican chairman of the Armed Service Committee, said, “The reason we are doing this is to expose the hoax of the year, which has been needlessly scaring young people.”

It is remarkable that, despite the obvious concern among young people, there has been almost no discussion about the draft in the major media until this week. The media continues to downplay the possibility, accepting as good coin the reassurances of Republicans and Democrats that there is no thought of reestablishing conscription.

The question was raised directly to Bush and Kerry during their debate Friday night in St. Louis, when one of the audience participants, a young man named Daniel Farley, asked Bush a clearly hostile question: “Mr. President, since we continue to police the world, how do you intend to maintain our military presence without re-instituting a draft?”

Both candidates had to respond, and each did what he does best: Bush lied and Kerry evaded.

Bush declared flatly, “We’re not going to have a draft, period... Now, forget all this talk about a draft. We’re not going to have a draft so long as I am the president.”

Bush did not attempt to respond to the “police the world” part of the question, which gave some hint of the deep-seated popular opposition, not only to the war in Iraq, but to the threat of new wars implicit in Bush's doctrine of preemptive war. Bush has repeatedly threatened Iran and North Korea—along with Iraq, part of his “axis of evil”—a phrase he revived in the course of

Friday's debate. Given that Iraq has tied down parts or all of the ten divisions that now comprise the US Army, major military action against any other antagonist would clearly require a vast increase in military personnel, which only conscription can supply.

Kerry followed Bush in responding to the draft question. He said, "Daniel, I don't support a draft. But let me tell you where the president's policies have put us... our military is overextended under the president. Our Guard and reserves have been turned into almost active duty. You've got people doing two and three rotations. You've got stop-loss policies, so people can't get out when they were supposed to. You've got a back-door draft right now."

Kerry's answer was more revealing than Bush's. His pro forma statement of non-support to the draft was followed by six sentences elaborating the reasons why the US military needs more manpower than it currently has access to. He decided not to repeat Bush's categorical formulation, "no draft as long as I'm president."

The Annenberg poll reveals illusions among young people that a vote for Kerry is a means of staving off the draft—illusions that could tip the balance in a close election. But the foreign policy proposed by the Democratic candidate will involve deployment of US military forces on a scale equivalent to that planned by Bush, requiring recruitment far beyond the 40,000 additional troops for which Kerry has publicly called.

Kerry criticizes the Bush administration's treatment of recently retired Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki in many of his campaign speeches. Shinseki was repudiated by the Pentagon after he told Congress, prior to the invasion, that several hundred thousand troops would be required to conquer and control Iraq. He was subsequently forced out.

Kerry also hailed the admission last week by former Iraq civilian administrator Paul Bremer that he had been rebuffed in seeking more troops.

The Democratic candidate has repeatedly declared that his policy in Iraq is not to withdraw, but to win. It is no secret that any serious effort to suppress the growing nationalist insurgency in Iraq will require deploying tens of thousands of additional US troops.

Kerry has also criticized Bush for allowing Iraq to distract him from greater threats in Iran and North Korea. Any significant military conflict with Iran (population 70 million, compared to 25 million in Iraq), or with North Korea (population 23 million, with an army of one million and reportedly a small number of crude nuclear weapons),

would require a rapid increase, perhaps a doubling or tripling, of deployable US military manpower.

Neither party can talk about this reality before the election. But the immediate electoral impact is not the main reason the politicians hesitate to push forward with any move to return to the draft. More fundamental are the implications for the stability of American society itself. Within the ruling elite, there are fears that reestablishment of conscription under the present circumstances would lead to a political explosion.

This accounts, in large part, for the prevailing opposition to the draft among the Pentagon brass, despite the obvious strains on military manpower. Those now in command of the US military are for the most part veterans of the Vietnam War debacle, where they experienced the decomposition of a mass conscript army in an unpopular war against an intransigent and highly motivated enemy. With good reason, they fear a similar outcome in Iraq.

There are also related to domestic considerations. The American ruling elite, whose social policies are ever more overtly directed against the basic interests of the working population in favor of the further enrichment of a financial oligarchy, require a military that could be trusted to employ violence against mass social and political unrest at home. There are doubtless those who argue that a professional, rather than a conscript, army would be a more reliable instrument for internal repression. But the requirements of an aggressively imperialist foreign policy, whose aim is the establishment of American global hegemony, increasingly render the maintenance of an all-volunteer military untenable.



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