

US Army National Guard faces recruitment crisis

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The US Army National Guard is facing a recruitment crisis as a result of Washington's military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, Lieutenant General H. Steven Blum, chief of the National Guard Bureau, admitted in a briefing for reporters at the Pentagon last December. Recruitment has plunged to 30 percent of National Guard goals during the last few months, prompting a decision to triple monetary incentives designed to lure working class youth into joining.

While attempting to put a good face on a serious crisis for the Pentagon, Blum told reporters that the National Guard was 15,000 soldiers below its needed troop level of 350,000, and that despite the added incentive, it would probably remain below its targeted level for the first time since 1989.

The Associated Press reported on January 26 that the Army National Guard is seeking authorization to offer \$15,000 bonuses to active National Guard soldiers who agree to re-enlist, a 300 percent increase over the present bonus. The same offer would be made to active-duty Army soldiers who agree to join the National Guard when they are discharged from the Army. Both bonuses are tax-free if the soldiers sign up while serving overseas.

New recruits will be offered \$10,000 to join, a 40 percent increase over the present \$6,000. "We're in a more difficult recruiting environment," stated Blum. "There's no question."

To boost its lagging numbers, the National Guard is adding 1,400 recruiters who are to fan out to high schools and poor and working class communities throughout the country, emphasizing patriotism, rather than joining to get an education.

"We are correcting some of our recruiting themes and slogans to reflect the reality of today," stated Blum. "We're not talking about one weekend a month and

two weeks a year and college tuition. We're talking about service to the nation."

The invasion and occupation of Iraq has put a tremendous strain on the National Guard. According to General Blum, 44 percent of the Army's combat forces in Iraq are National Guard troops. The open-ended wars and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan have stretched the US military too thin in the face of popular resistance. Almost a third of the National Guard—*USAToday* puts the number at 102,876—is presently mobilized for duty around the world. Since September 11 and the US government's announced war on terrorism, Blum said, the Army National Guard has averaged about 100,000 soldiers on active duty every day.

CBS News reports that as of December 2004, 144 Army and Air National Guard soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan or Iraq and another 1,158 wounded—the majority in Iraq—since the series of US-sponsored wars began after September 11.

The emergence of the National Guard, in its present form, began at the end of the nineteenth century when mass struggles by the working class—particularly the 1877 railway strikes—took on insurrectionary proportions. Business interests and state governments responded with the building of fortress-like armories in major cities and an expansion of the state militias, which were renamed the National Guard.

The Guard has served as a state-based force during peacetime. It has been called out in response to strikes, ghetto rebellions and the mass antiwar demonstrations of the 1960s. It has also been used for domestic disaster relief operations such as fires, floods, tornadoes, hurricanes and earthquakes. During wartime, the Guard can be retained at any time by presidential order to supplement regular army troops in military operations.

Although the Guard has been called up before in Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti and the first Gulf War, generally its troops were not deployed directly in an overseas combat role. However, with the declaration of the “war on terror” following 9/11, the Bush administration assumed command over the National Guard and has deployed it extensively in the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. This is the largest deployment of Guard forces since Vietnam to have extended stays of a year.

As a result, many active-duty soldiers who leave the Army are reluctant to join the National Guard. In the past, the Guard was able to recruit approximately one half of the Army’s outgoing active-duty members. Now, according to General Blum, that figure has dropped to 35 percent.

Even the corporate-controlled American media is compelled to draw the obvious conclusion from this fall-off. “Many of the departing GIs now view Guard service as a potential ticket back to Iraq or Afghanistan and are not signing up,” states a CBS/AP article posted December 17.

Blum also revealed that the National Guard is seeking an emergency \$7 billion to replace equipment destroyed in its overseas operations, as part of a demand for \$20 billion over the next three years.

While Blum insisted that National Guard troops are receiving the same equipment and safety measures that the regular Army receives, it was a Tennessee National Guard member, Army Specialist Thomas Wilson, who in early December posed a defiant question to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld about the failure of the Pentagon to supply armored vehicles and other safety measures to Guard soldiers deployed in the Iraqi occupation. To the surprise of the Pentagon and Rumsfeld, his question was loudly cheered by the assembled troops at the “town hall” question-and-answer session, expressing their pent-up hostility toward the war.

The Pentagon brass has adopted a number of stopgap measures to retain or increase troop strength in Iraq. These include the appropriation of the National Guard for overseas military purposes, stop-loss orders that involuntarily extend the active-duty enlistment of soldiers in combat (sometimes referred to as a “backdoor draft”), and the calling up of IRR (Inactive Ready Reserve) members, who most likely had no intention of ever returning to active duty. Additionally,

the Bush administration has tried to boost its retention rate by increasing money for housing and education allowances. However, these efforts have failed to produce a rise in recruitment. With the continued decline in forces, there is increasing discussion about a possible reintroduction of the draft.

Admitting that Guard commanders had long padded their numbers, Blum said he issued an order to end the practice in order to have an accurate count of soldiers in the service. Blum said that for years officers would place the names of soldiers who had left the service on their rolls to give the appearance that recruiters had met their goals.

Blum’s statements come on the heels of the leaked memo from the head of the US Army Reserve, Lt. Gen. James Helmly, who warned the Pentagon that the 200,000-member Reserve was “degenerating into a ‘broken’ force” due to the strains of the Iraq war and the continued deployment in Afghanistan.

These warnings from the senior commanders of the US National Guard and Reserve are a pale reflection of the growing unrest within the ranks of the US military, under conditions in which the Bush administration has indicated that it intends to continue its occupation of Iraq indefinitely.



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