

# As recruitment falls, top military official warns of strains on US forces

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In testimony before Congress May 2, US chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Richard Myers voiced concern that the sustained deployment of US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan poses “significant risks” for future American war plans.

In the annual “Military Risk Assessment and Threat Mitigation Plan,” Myers reportedly stated that the level of deployed troops meant that future wars could not be carried out as quickly and with as few American casualties as the Pentagon has planned. The assessment itself is classified, but several American newspapers reported on the findings through leaks from top military officials.

A senior Defense Department official quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* said, “The assessment is that we would succeed [in future wars], but there would be higher casualties and more collateral damage. We would have to win uglier.”

Commenting on the assessment, the *Times* noted that it “is a concession to military realities of the past three years...Now, with nearly 140,000 US troops in Iraq two years after the fall of Baghdad, along with commitments in Afghanistan and for the global war on terrorism, many Pentagon officials admit that the bloody insurgency in Iraq has tempered that vision of what the US military can and cannot do.”

Myers’ testimony directly contradicts a statement made by President Bush at his press conference last week. Asked whether the number of troops tied up in Iraq “is limiting your options to go beyond the diplomatic solutions that you’ve described for North Korea [and] Iran,” Bush replied: “The person I asked that to...is the chairman of the Joint Chiefs [Myers], my top military adviser. I said, ‘Do you feel that we’ve limited our capacity to deal with other problems because of our troop levels in Iraq?’ And the answer is

no, he doesn’t feel we’re limited. He feels like we’ve got plenty of capacity.”

Myers’ statements are an indication of deepening concern within sections of the military and political establishment over the situation in Iraq. The US military faces an ongoing insurgency in Iraq, including a spate of recent bomb attacks on police recruitment centers that have killed over 200 in the past week alone. Unable to cobble together an Iraqi police force and military capable of repressing the Iraqi people on its own, the US military continues to maintain a massive military presence. The 138,000 troops presently stationed in Iraq are only slightly less than the number reached during the Iraqi elections earlier this year. The military has repeatedly extended tours of duty for US soldiers and placed enormous strains on the Army Reserve and Army National Guard.

These developments have fueled a growing opposition to the war within the United States. A recent USA Today/CNN/Gallup opinion poll, released on May 3, found that support for the war has fallen to its lowest levels. The poll showed 57 percent of the population believing the war was not worth fighting, up from 50 percent in February. This drop in support comes at the same time as the swearing in of the new government in Iraq, which has been touted by the Bush administration as a great victory for democracy. In fact, the new government has been unable to resolve any of the deep conflicts between sections of the Iraqi elite over power sharing and the divvying up of oil revenues.

The unpopularity of the war in Iraq has resulted in a growing recruitment crisis. Both the Army and the Marines—which comprise the bulk of ground forces in Iraq—fell short of recruiting goals in April. For the Army, this was the third straight month it missed recruiting targets. Figures for May are projected to fall

short again. The Army is 15 percent behind its goals for the fiscal year, now over halfway through.

For the Marines, April was the fourth straight month of missed targets. Both the Army Reserves and the Army National Guard have consistently fallen short of goals for several months.

The decline in Army recruitment comes in spite of repeated increases in cash bonuses given to new enlistees. The maximum bonus for a three-year enlistment has increased three times over the past year, from \$15,000 to \$20,000, with suggestions that it could be raised again.

Less scrupulous methods have become more common as well. In a May 3 article (“Army Recruiters Say They Feel Pressure to Bend Rules,” by Damien Cave), the *New York Times* outlined many of the tactics used by recruiters to meet quotas. One case the newspaper cited was that of a 21-year-old man from southern Ohio who signed up for the Army immediately after finishing a three-week term in a psychiatric ward, suffering from bi-polar disorder.

Normally, a mental illness would automatically disqualify the man from joining the Army. However, the recruiters apparently sought to cover up his illness. He was disqualified only after repeated attempts by the man’s parents to inform the military of his condition.

The *Times* cites an interview with another unnamed recruiter from northern Ohio: “He has been bending or breaking enlistment rules for months, he said, hiding police records and medical histories of potential recruits. His commanders have encouraged such deception, he said, because they know there is no other way to meet the Army’s stiff recruitment quotas. ‘The problem is that no one wants to join,’ the recruiter said. ‘We have to play fast and loose with the rules just to get by.’”

Interviews with recruiters across the country indicated that these tactics were systemic. According to the *Times*, “Several spoke of concealing mental-health histories and police records. They described falsified documents, wallet-size cheat sheets slipped to applicants before the military’s aptitude test and commanding officers who look the other way.”

The Army itself reports a sharp increase in substantiated cases of recruitment improprieties over the past several years—from 199 in 1999 to 320 in 2004. The number of recruiters investigated rose to

1,118—nearly 20 percent of all Army recruiters. In addition to cheating on tests and hiding records, offenses included incidents in which recruiters threatened enlistees or falsely promised them that they would not be sent to Iraq if they entered the Army.

The percentage of recruiting officers who have been punished for improprieties has also declined—from 50 percent in 2002 to 30 percent in 2004. This is another indication that the methods have the tacit support of the military brass.

In the case of the 21-year-old mental health patient, the young man’s father said that Army officials told him that no action would be taken against the recruiters. He voiced disbelief, noting that the officers “were willing to put my son and other recruits at risk. It’s beyond my comprehension and appalling.”

A 17-year old high school student, David McSwane, recently exposed the methods of the recruiters by pretending to be a potential recruit, while secretly taping his encounters with Army officials for his school paper. McSwane recorded the recruiter advising him to create a fake high-school diploma as proof of graduation, after McSwane told him he was a high school dropout. When McSwane told the recruiter that he had a marijuana habit, the recruiter advised him to purchase a detoxification kit and personally took him to a place where he could get one.

The growing strains on the military as a result of the explosion of American militarism inevitably raise the possibility of a military draft. As the American ruling elite prepares for fresh military adventures, there will no doubt be increased calls for the introduction of some form of compulsory military service. Within the military command, however, memories of the disintegration of the conscript army in Vietnam make such a solution seem potentially worse than the problem itself.



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