

US military recruitment crisis deepens

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Statistics continue to be released showing a slump in both US military recruitment and the rate of re-enlistment by personnel whose contract has expired. The worst affected branch is the active, or full-time Army, followed by the part-time Army Reserve and National Guard.

Major General Michael Rochelle, the US Army's recruiting commander, told a May 20 press conference: "Today's conditions represent the most challenging conditions we have seen in recruiting in my 33 years in this uniform... We now have very, very low propensity to enlist, both on the part of young Americans and likewise on the part of influencers... to recommend Army service."

According to Rochelle, polling among "influencers"—the parents, sports coaches and other adult role models of 17-to-24-year old Americans—shows a sharp decline in the number who are prepared to encourage youth to enlist. Before September 11, 2001, the rate was 22 percent. It has now fallen to 14 percent.

In April, the active Army missed its recruitment target by 42 percent, while the Army Reserve fell short 37 percent. On an annual basis, the Army is 16 percent behind schedule to recruit the 80,000 new soldiers it requires by September 1.

From October 2003 to September 2004, the Army National Guard missed its target of 56,000 new recruits by close to 7,000. In the final months of 2004, only two thirds of the required number of recruits joined up. Unprecedented financial incentives are now being offered to people prepared to enlist in the National Guard. Former military personnel are being offered a \$15,000 bonus, as are serving National Guard soldiers who re-enlist for six years. People who have never served in the military are being offered a \$10,000 bonus. The recruitment slump has continued, however.

The Marine Corp, which was used extensively last year to fight some of the worst combat in Iraq, is also being affected. This year, it missed its recruitment target for four consecutive months for the first time in 10 years.

Alongside the recruitment slump, the rate at which the military retained existing personnel through re-enlistment

fell in 2004 to 63.2 percent, compared with 75.1 percent in 2003. The re-enlistment rate in one Indiana National Guard infantry battalion sent to Iraq fell from 85 percent in 2003 to just 35 percent in 2004.

Of particular concern to the Pentagon, the number of junior officers leaving the Army at the end of their initial enlistment has jumped. A total of 8.7 percent of Army lieutenants and captains left in 2004 for example—the highest rate since 2001.

There is no doubt as to what the major factor is behind the recruitment and re-enlistment crisis: the continuing quagmire in Iraq.

American military personnel sent to Iraq can reasonably anticipate suffering some form of harm. The 22,000-strong First Infantry Division, for example, which recently returned to Germany after a tour in northern Iraq around the city of Tikrit, suffered 193 dead and 845 wounded. Marine units hurled into the bloody fighting in Fallujah and the surrounding Anbar province last year suffered far higher casualty rates.

Since the March 2003 invasion, 1,661 US soldiers and marines have lost their lives in Iraq and over 12,000 have been wounded-in-action. As well, at least 18,000 Army personnel have been flown out of Iraq for non-combat medical reasons such as non-battle injuries and disease, according to the Army Medical Department.

Anyone enlisting in the Army, Marine Corp or even the National Guard can reasonably expect to be sent for at least one and possibly more tours in the occupied country. Some of the active Army units in Iraq at present, such as the Third Infantry Division, are on their second deployment in 26 months. The Fourth Infantry and 101st Airborne Divisions will deploy for their second tour by the end of the year.

A sergeant about to resign, 23-year-old Nate Benco, told *Stars & Stripes*: "That's not going to change. Anyone coming in now has to know they're going to be gone most of the time."

Reservists or National Guardsmen make up 40 percent of the 140,000 American personnel in Iraq and have

suffered one third of all Army casualties. The part-time National Guard, which historically been rarely deployed overseas in combat roles, is being used by the Bush administration to supply a large proportion of the front-line infantry force in Iraq. Five National Guard infantry brigades—from New York, Hawaii, Louisiana, Idaho and Tennessee—are currently in the country on a 12-month tour. In effect that means they will be mobilised for a period as long as 18 months, including preliminary training and demobilisation.

The suspicion that the war in Iraq is tainted and that something sinister lies behind the Bush administration's foreign policy emerges from interviews with military personnel leaving the armed forces. An Army captain, Dave Fulton, who is planning to resign in the coming months, told the *Los Angeles Times*: "The undefined goals of the 'war on terror' are making it really hard for the Army to keep people right now." Another young officer, Captain Vincent Touhey, said: "What's the end point? When do you declare victory?"

There are ample signs that the state of affairs is triggering anxiety and even desperation in American ruling circles. The political establishment as a whole is committed to continuing the occupation of Iraq and the assertion of US dominance over the Middle East. At the same time, other strategic targets for US military aggression are being discussed, from Iran, to Syria, to North Korea. Troops will be needed.

After the experience during the Vietnam War, however, when the conscript Army began to disintegrate in response to mass antiwar sentiment, there is reluctance to support the reinstatement of the draft. Opposition to Iraq is already pervasive among the American people and the conscription of thousands of youth to fight and die enforcing the occupation could rapidly become the political focus for a revival of the mass antiwar movement that developed in 2003.

The *New York Times*' editorial on May 29, "The Death Spiral of the Volunteer Army", pointed to the concerns in the political establishment. After bemoaning the crisis of the military and the debacle in Iraq, it declared a return to the draft as "militarily foolish and politically explosive".

It recommended instead "expanding the potential recruiting pool" by allowing women into more combat roles, allowing gays to openly serve in the armed forces, and signing up "immigrants with promises of citizenship", and changing how the US government "treats its ground troops". Why women, gays and immigrants should find the idea of an Iraq deployment

appealing, the *Times* did not bother to answer.

The reality is that under conditions where there is little ideological commitment among military personnel or the American people to the occupation of Iraq, any significant turn around in the recruitment crisis is unlikely. Compulsion is increasingly becoming the only method available to the American ruling class to find the human material needed to assert its imperialist interests internationally.

In order to keep up numbers, the past two years have already seen the pervasive use of "stop loss" orders, which block individual soldiers from leaving at the end of their term of enlistment if their unit has been mobilised or is scheduled for deployment. Some 40,000 Army, Reserve and National Guard troops have been served with "stop-loss" orders since 2003. In some cases, individual soldiers have been forced to serve more than 12 months past the end of their contract.

The military is also using other forms of de-facto drafting. To bring Guard and Reserve units up to full strength, the military has begun a broader call-up of the "Individual Ready Reserve" (IRR)—some 114,000 people who have left the military but are still on the books for potential mobilisation, ostensibly due to their specialised skills. *Soldiers for The Truth* (www.sftt.org) reported on May 17 that now, as well as specialists, hundreds of IRR infantry are being called up.

SFTT spoke with one of them, 37-year-old Chris Bray, who had joined the Army in 1999 to get money for college. He left in late 2001, describing his most important responsibility as being the designated driver to transport drunken officers back to their quarters at Fort Benning, Georgia. He has been slated for likely deployment to Iraq as part of an infantry unit.

Only 305 IRR infantry have been mobilised thus far, but thousands more are on the military's rolls. A military spokesman told SFTT that "to date there are no plans" for a larger call-up.

As the Iraq occupation drags on, however, broader forms of compulsory service, including conscription, will have to be entertained by the White House and Pentagon.



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