Animosity toward military service produces desperate US recruiting measures

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Disaffection among the American people with the Iraq occupation and general opposition to the militarist trajectory of US foreign policy is producing a sustained decline in military recruitment rates. Thousands of soldiers, marines and National Guard members are leaving the armed forces for the same reasons.

In the Seattle area, for example, the Army has enlisted just 94 people in the past seven months, out of a target of 266 by September 30. Nationally, from October 1, 2004, to the beginning of May, the active or full-time US Army signed up just 35,926 people toward a 12-month target of 80,000. At the current rate of approximately 5,000 recruits per month, the Army will fall 20,000 short—the equivalent of an entire infantry division.

The part-time Army Reserve had signed up just 7,283 recruits, a little over 1,000 per month. To reach its target of 22,175 recruits by September 30, the rate will have to triple. The Army National Guard is languishing at 19,000 soldiers below strength, with 331,000 troops instead of the regulated 350,000. The Marine Corp is struggling to meet its annual recruitment target for the first time in a decade.

Iraq is the primary factor in the recruitment crisis. The latest *Washington Post*-ABC News poll found that three quarters of respondents believed the number of American casualties in Iraq were unacceptable and that close to 60 percent said the war was not worth fighting. Retired colonel Andrew Bacevich, a professor at Boston University, told the *Post*: "It appears that Americans are coming to the realisation that the war in Iraq is not being won and may well prove unwinnable. That conclusion bleeds over into a conviction that it may not have been necessary in the first place."

Just 14 percent of parents and other "influencers" are prepared to encourage 18-to-24 year-olds to enlist for military service, according to Major General Michael Rochelle, the US military's top recruitment officer. Master Sergeant Jim Sneed, who is in charge of National Guard recruitment in southwest Missouri, told the *Joplin Globe*: "There are places where they are not waving the flag, and those recruiters are feeling the effect. If the people are not behind it—serving their country—certainly the recruiter will have a difficult time."

After 1973, when the draft was abolished, the US military was able to rely on what amounts to economic conscription. Lower-income youth signed up for a term in the armed forces, often with the support of their parents, in order to get college grants, basic skills or a well-paying job.

The inequality and disadvantage that has fueled recruitment has clearly not gone away. What has changed is the popular sentiment toward the military. Charles Peña, a defence policy analyst for the Cato Institute, a US thinktank, told United Press International on June 2: "The problem with Army recruitment now is that, unlike in peacetime, the Army is not an opportunity to benefit yourself in terms of advancing education or starting a career. Now people understand that joining the Army could mean getting shipped to Iraq and potentially getting killed."

While it is an issue generally ignored by both the media and the political establishment, there is a groundswell of anger among American parents against the once accepted efforts by military recruiters to convince teenagers to join the armed forces.

The focus of parental opposition is a provision in the Bush administration's "No Child Left Behind" program, which obligates schools to give military recruiters the same access to students' personal information as they provide to colleges and employers. Unless a parent notifies the school that they want to "opt out", the name, home address and phone number of each student is handed over to the military.

A feature in the June 3 *New York Times*, "Growing Problem for Military: Parents", provided a rare report on some of the backlash against the law. A recruiter in New York told the *Times* that, unlike several years ago, "people hang up all time" when they call homes. A recruiter in Ohio recounted: "I had one father say if he saw me on his doorstep I better have some protection on me. We see a lot of hostility."

In Whittier, southern California, parents protested to the school district for failing to make them aware of their right to "opt out" from the military having access to their children's personal details. The district has now drafted a form that clearly shows how parents can indicate they do not want the details released. Orlando Terrazas, a 51-year-old father and one of the parents behind the protest, told the *Times*: "Because of the situation we're in now, I would not want my son to serve. It's the policy that I'm against, not the military."

At Garfield High School in Seattle, the Parent-Teacher-Student Association (PTSA) voted in May to ban military recruiters from the school. One of the parents at Garfield, Stephen Ludwig, told the *Times*: "The recruiters are in your face, in the library, in the lunchroom. They're contacting the most vulnerable students and recruiting them to go to war."

The school district has ignored the vote so as not to lose $15 million in federal funding. It is, however, distributing forms for parents to "opt out".

The pressure on the US military to find ways to fill the ranks is leading to desperate recruiting measures, including preparations for some form of draft, which will only heighten the opposition and hostility among broad layers of the population.

Recruiters have been accused of falsely telling youth they would definitely not be sent to the Middle East if they joined and of

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generally downplaying the reality of enlisting in a war machine that now has troops deployed in 120 countries, including the 140,000-strong occupation force in Iraq.

Unprecedented financial incentives are being offered to bribe both new recruits and soldiers considering re-enlistment, including signing bonuses of as much as $20,000 and college grants of up to $70,000. The maximum enlistment age for the National Guard and reserves has been raised from 34 to 39.

The White House and the Pentagon are resorting to far more questionable policies to try and get personnel. The use of "stop-loss" orders that prevent soldiers leaving active service when their enlistment has expired has been widely commented on. The military has also selectively called up over 6,000 ex-service personnel with specialised skills who are on the rolls of the Individual Ready Reserve.

The Army's new option of a 15-month active enlistment for some jobs, such as the infantry, with all the benefits associated with more traditional two- or four-year terms, is now attracting attention. It is a blatant attempt to encourage low-income youth into signing up, most likely as cannon fodder for the Iraq occupation, with the false expectation they will be able to get out of the military quickly.

This particular measure was subjected to a scathing comment on the *Soldiers For the Truth* website by military analyst Chad Miles on May 31. Miles noted that "the devil is in the details". People taking the offer will in fact be signing up to the military for eight years, with their training time not included in the 15-month term, which is followed by two years of mandatory service in the National Guard or reserves, and four years or so listed as an Individual Ready Reserve, subject to call-up at any time.

Miles noted that during the mandatory service in the part-time branches of the Army, "the chances of being called back to active duty would probably be pretty high during this time considering the reliance on the Guard and the reserve in Iraq". Up to 45 percent of the troops in Iraq are reservists or National Guard, including five brigades of National Guard infantry.

The US Army introduced a new policy last month to slash the attrition rate among first-term enlisted soldiers. Battalion commanders, including those overseeing training camps, have been stripped of their power to throw out personnel for alcoholism and drug abuse, unsatisfactory performance, inadequate standards of fitness, pregnancy and several other issues. They will instead be referred to a brigade-level review, where the overriding consideration will be keeping them on the Army's books.

The memo explaining the policy from the Army Deputy Chief of Staff stated: "We are an army at war and increasing levels of attrition of first-term enlisted soldiers in both the training base and units is a matter of great concern... By reducing attrition one percent, the Army can save up to 3,000 initial-term soldiers. That's 3,000 more soldiers in our formations."

The implied lowering of standards is likely to result in hundreds of soldiers who in the past would have been deemed to be physically or psychologically unsuited for military service being sent to Iraq—an added danger to themselves, their fellow soldiers and the Iraqi people.

Parallel with the efforts to gain more voluntary recruits and keep existing personnel, preparations are being made for some type of draft. Virtually all American males between the ages of 18 and 25 are legally obligated to register with the draft authority, the Selective Service System (SSS). Over the past three years, the SSS has negotiated with US state governments making registration for the draft a pre-requisite for obtaining a drivers' license, holding a state job or attending a state college. Just nine states have not implemented such laws.

The result has been an increase in the rate of registration, and the persecution of those who refuse. A total of 11,889,604 men born between 1979 and 1984 were listed as "eligible" for call-up as of September 30, 2004. The details of more than 162,000 people were sent to the Department of Justice for investigation and possible prosecution for failing to register.

A little known fact is that SSS information is handed over to military recruiters. The agency's 2004 report to Congress notes: "The Agency provides names of registrants to the Secretary of Defence for recruiting purposes, in accordance with a provision in the Military Selective Service Act. Additionally, information about Armed Forces opportunities and a business reply card are enclosed with the registration acknowledgment that Selective Service sends to each new registrant. Thus, the Defence Department benefits by 'piggy-backing' on Agency routine mailings and it reimburses Selective Service for the additional costs of including DoD materials."

Among the possibilities being canvassed by the SSS is the use of its database to carry out a selective conscription of individuals with particular skills. In the 1980s, the SSS was delegated to prepare for a draft of medical personnel in the event of a national emergency. The agency proposed to Congress in its 2004 report that this program could be "expanded if so directed by Congress and the White House to include other shortfall skills required by the US Armed Forces or civil authorities".

Richard Flahavan, an associate director of the SSS, told the June 2 *Washington Post*: "We're not advocating that it should be done. All we're saying is... [w]e know how to run a draft." Among the occupations Flahavan listed as possible candidates for a "special skills" draft were linguists, computer experts, police officers and firefighters.

The SSS proposals must reflect a broader discussion in Washington that a policy of selective conscription to replenish the ranks of the armed forces would not provoke the same degree of opposition as a general draft. Such a calculation, however, is an attempt to sidestep the source of the recruitment crisis. Millions of American working people believe that US soldiers are killing and being killed in Iraq for illegitimate and criminal ends. The dragooning of particular professions into the military would heighten the popular outrage toward the quagmire that the Bush administration has created.

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