

Students, parents rebuff US military recruiters

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Students and parents are reacting to increasingly aggressive tactics by US military recruiters on high school campuses across the country. Unable to meet recruitment quotas and facing growing opposition to the war in Iraq, the Pentagon has boosted its advertising budget, launched a new TV ad campaign, and contracted a private firm to compile a massive database of potential recruits, some as young as 16 years old.

Since 2002, under the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind law, high schools are required to provide the military with lists of students—including their names, addresses and telephone numbers. Students, or their parents, must make a written request to their schools to have their names taken off the lists.

In Massachusetts, more than 5,000 high school students in five of the state's largest school districts have asked that their names be removed from the recruitment lists. In Boston, about 3,700 students, or close to 20 percent of those enrolled in the city's high schools, have opted out. At Cambridge Rindge and Latin school in nearby Cambridge more than half the students, or about 950, have requested that school administrators not pass their names on to the military.

Overall, in five of the state's largest school districts—Boston, Cambridge, Worcester, Lowell and Fall River—about 18 percent of public high school students have signed forms asking that their names be removed from the lists. In many cases, students have been advised by their parents to have their names removed.

Gwen Claiborne, an 18-year-old student at Madison Park Technical Vocational High School in the predominantly minority Roxbury section of Boston, said her father, who served in the military, urged her to take her name off the list. Gwen told the *Boston Globe*, "It's much more scary now. A whole bunch of troops are dying."

At Cambridge Rindge and Latin, senior Lidija Ristic told the *Globe* she felt urban students are particularly being targeted by military recruiters. "I'm just for peace," said Lidija, 17, "I think it's horrible that they come here and try to recruit people."

On November 8, voters in San Francisco passed a resolution aimed at curtailing the impact of military recruiters on city high school and college campuses. Proposition I, also known as the "College Not Combat" initiative, stops short of banning military recruiters from school grounds, which would require schools to forfeit federal funds.

The initiative—which passed with a 60 percent majority—encourages school officials to offer students alternatives

to the benefits of military service touted by recruiters, such as scholarships and job training. According to CollegeNotCombat.org, a "yes" vote on the proposition indicates that voters "want it to be city policy to oppose military recruiters' access to public schools and to consider funding scholarships for education and training that could provide an alternative to military service."

A USA TODAY/CNN Gallup poll released Monday shows plummeting support for George W. Bush's presidency, with an overall approval rating of 37 percent. Only 35 percent of those questioned approved of Bush's handling of the war in Iraq. This growing opposition to the administration's policies has found expression in unfilled military recruitment quotas.

The US Army missed its 2005 recruitment target by a wide margin, falling short of its 80,000 goal by more than 6,600 soldiers (for the fiscal year ending September 30), the largest shortfall since 1979. The Army National Guard, Army Reserve and Air National Guard also missed their goals, each recruiting less than 90 percent of their targets.

Interviewed on MSNBC television, retired General Barry McCaffrey commented, "We're having some very significant recruiting difficulties. There's no question." He added, "This is a tremendous shortfall. And it is even more significant and severe in the National Guard, which I think is starting to melt down."

In the last five years, the number of African-Americans signing up to join the military has fallen sharply, from 23.5 percent of recruits in fiscal 2000 to 13.9 percent in the first four months of 2005—a drop of 41 percent. Black enrollment in the Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) is down 36 percent since 2001. Overall, nationwide enrollment in the ROTC had dropped more than 16 percent by the end of the 2004-2005 school year.

In an attempt to counter falling recruitment, the Army has changed its standards to allow greater numbers of high school dropouts as well as more recruits who score in the lowest category on military aptitude tests. As of March 2005, five months into the fiscal recruiting year, the percentage of recruits in the active-duty Army without high school diplomas was more than double the percentage of the previous year. The number who scored the lowest on the aptitude test had also doubled.

In a three-year trial, the US Army has raised the maximum age for new recruits for the part-time Army Reserve and National Guard from 34 to 39. This has increased the potential pool of recruits from about 60 million to 82 million. This segment of

soldiers—formerly thought of as “weekend warriors”—has steadily increased as a percentage of combat troops in Iraq. Nearly one-fifth of the 2,079 US military fatalities in Iraq have been from the National Guard or reserves.

Many parents, fearful of seeing their sons and daughters shipped off to die in combat, are far less supportive of a military career for their children than in the past. Polls indicate that a solid majority of parents are unwilling to encourage their children to enlist, a significant drop from five years ago, when only one third of parents were opposed. Recruiters report an increased number of parents hanging up on cold calls to a potential young recruit’s home.

In an effort to lure more enlistees—and sway parental opinion—the US Army last summer poured an additional \$500 million into its recruitment campaign budget, raising it to a total of \$1.3 billion. It has switched over to a single marketing communications agency to oversee all advertising, media relations, Internet campaigns and other promotions.

Included in this recruitment budget is a \$343 million Pentagon contract with Massachusetts-based Mullen Advertising. Mullen has contracted BeNow to compile the Joint Advertising and Marketing Research Studies (JAMRS) Recruitment Database to target potential young recruits, ages 16 to 18. BeNow, also based in Massachusetts, is a database marketing firm that was recently acquired by Equifax, one of the “big three” credit reporting agencies that compile a wide range of personal and financial data.

While the Pentagon has been compiling the database since 2002, it only came to the public eye this past May. The JAMRS project has been criticized by the “Dump the Database Coalition”—an alliance of civil liberties, religious, antiwar and parents groups—which maintains that it violates the 1974 Privacy Act. Over 100 organizations have sent a letter to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld calling for the dismantling of the database.

The database is an amalgam of information collected from the Selective Service System, state drivers’ license records and data purchased by BeNow from private database firms, including the Student Marketing Group (SMG) and American Students List (ASL).

American Students List sells databases of children in kindergarten through high school, with information on sex, age, income, religion and ethnicity, which is often obtained from surveys administered at schools ostensibly for education-related purposes. Both SMG and ASL have been under investigation by the Federal Trade Commission for either improperly collecting data or illegally distributing it.

Information gathered for the giant database includes names, Social Security numbers, grade point averages, ethnicity, education levels, high school names, telephone numbers, ages, addresses, intent to go to college, interest in the military and scores on military aptitude tests. The database already includes the names of more than 12 million young people. Critics say the information could also be shared by the military—without notifying teenagers or their parents—with law enforcement, tax authorities or other government agencies.

Last month, the Pentagon also launched a \$10 million advertising campaign which urges parents to “make it a two-way

conversation” with children looking to join the military. Facing limited returns from their traditional “Be All You Can Be” slogan, the military is trying a different tactic—focusing on the supposed opportunities provided by military service in an attempt to win the support of mothers and fathers.

The campaign includes four 30-second spots on cable television networks and print ads in publications ranging from *Oprah Magazine* to *Field and Stream*. The *San Francisco Chronicle* describes one of the TV spots:

“‘Mom, you know how I love being on the water, right? How I love the environment?’ a young man asks his mother as they talk on their back porch. ‘I can be part of an environmental response team working on oil cleanups and stuff. I’m serious about this.

“‘So what do you think?’ the young man asks. A voice-over urges parents to ‘make it a two-way conversation’ and points them to the military’s web site...”

The likelihood of such an approach dramatically reversing the slide in recruitment numbers is slim. As Larry Suid, a military historian, commented to the *Chronicle*, “I don’t think it’s going to work as long as there’s a war still going on.”

Facing lagging recruitment figures, military recruiters are under increasing pressure to produce. The US Army’s 7,500 recruiters are expected to bring in two recruits apiece a month. According to a report last May in the *New York Times*, the Army admitted to 320 “recruitment improprieties” in 2004-2005, but admits that the real number is likely three times that amount.

More than 1,100 recruiters were investigated in 2004 for violations of recruitment standards, including using threats and coercion and falsely promising that recruits would not be sent to Iraq.

Recruiters have also falsified information on potential recruits to qualify them for military service. In one incident in Golden, Colorado, two recruiters allegedly encouraged a high school student to create a fake diploma. The Army has dismissed between 30 and 60 recruiters a year since 2000 for withholding negative information about a prospective recruit.



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