

# US military asks deceased officers to re-enlist

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10 January 2007

Just after Christmas, amid the preparations for an expansion of American troop numbers in Iraq, the US army sent a personalised appeal to some 5,100 retired officers asking them to re-enlist. Among those who received a letter were some 200 who had suffered serious injuries in the Iraq war, and, incredibly, the families of 75 officers who had lost their lives in Iraq.

Family members of the deceased were understandably distressed. Within days, the military hierarchy had gone into damage control. The Army's vice-chief of staff General Richard Cody declared it was an "inexcusable mistake" and that "every army leader is just sick that this happened". An error that resulted in an old database being used was blamed. Cody told the media that personal apologies had been made to each family and that senior commanders planned to write further apologies, "to let them know that the Army is still a family made strong by caring leadership and strong army families".

Whatever the precise reasons for the mistake, it is symptomatic of the crisis that exists within the ranks of the US armed forces. As the Bush administration prepares to intensify its unpopular, neo-colonial occupations in the Middle East and Central Asia, increasingly desperate steps are being taken to find the necessary cannon fodder.

Since September 11, 2001, at least 1.4 million American military personnel have been deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq. As of last month, some 420,000—or close to one third—had served two or more tours. Every brigade of the part-time National Guard has been mobilised for some form of operation overseas or domestically.

Casualties have continued to grow. Over 3,300 have been killed and close to 53,000 wounded or evacuated for medical conditions—including at least 3,000 troops who have suffered serious brain injuries. More than 100,000 veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq are seeking medical treatment from the badly stretched Veterans Affairs health system. The lives of millions of Americans have been turned upside down.

On every front, there are signs of profound disarray. Soldiers are deploying to a war that, in growing numbers,

they do not believe in. A recent survey of 9,000 serving troops by the *Military Times* found that just 41 percent now support the decision to invade Iraq. Just 50 percent believe the war will be "successful", and just 47 percent accept that it is part of a "war on terrorism"—the principal justification for the ongoing occupation. Only 38 percent support the Bush administration's plans to deploy additional troops. Some 39 percent stated there should be the same or less, while 13 percent stated there should be no troops at all in Iraq.

The prospect of being sent to Iraq has had a clear impact on recruitment. Military enlistment slumped in 2004 and 2005 despite the endless propaganda to justify the war. Units deploying to the Middle East have been brought to full strength by calling up reservists and the National Guard has been repeatedly used for overseas combat.

The extent of the crisis is highlighted by the fact that the volunteer US army at the end of the Cold War in 1991 consisted of 730,000 active personnel, recruited from a far smaller population than now. Today, service in the military is so unattractive to millions of American youth that the army is struggling to maintain a force of barely 500,000. The change is not due to economic factors. The past 15 years have witnessed the destruction of millions of well-paying jobs and plunged a large proportion of the American population into constant financial insecurity—conditions that generally make military service a more attractive economic option.

The present force has only been sustained by aggressive recruiting, unprecedented financial incentives, the lowering of education and health standards, and increasing the age people can join from 35 to 42. Up to \$40,000 is being offered to enlist. The military are particularly targeting high school graduates who aspire to attend college but whose families would struggle to pay the tuition fees, and former soldiers in financial difficulties.

Many recruits come from working class suburbs and regional towns where education and employment prospects are limited. Due to changes in recruiting

standards, the proportion of recruits without a regular high school diploma has increased from 13.1 percent in 2004 to 26.7 percent in 2006, according to the National Priorities Group think tank. Over 13,600 medical or moral character waivers were given to new recruits last year, compared with just 2,500 in 2005.

Incentives for serving soldiers to re-enlist have also been dramatically raised, particularly for specialists and officers who had been leaving at increased rates. Newly commissioned officers who agree to serve eight years active duty, instead of five, are now eligible for graduate school study with no cap on their tuition fees. *Stars and Stripes* reported last week that the US Navy is offering bonuses to doctors and dentists of between \$25,000 and \$50,000 to remain in the military for at least a further four years.

While evermore-naked economic conscription may have staved off a major crisis for now, it has not halted the deterioration of morale within the military. For all the rhetoric about “supporting the troops”, unit refitting, resupply and training is in turmoil. According to a *Washington Post* report last month, numerous units in the US are rated as “unready” for deployment due to shortages of equipment, which has to be diverted to outfit the brigades already overseas.

Referring to state-side units, retired general Barry McCaffrey told the *Army Times* on December 2: “Their equipment is broken or missing. They’re sustaining huge losses of high talent, their recruiting efforts have faltered. Without the National Guard and reserve, we would’ve gone under already.” Thousands of troops are aware that if their unit was hurriedly deployed, for whatever reason, they would do so with substandard equipment and training.

Under conditions where there are growing calls for an increase in the size of the US military, the current recruitment dilemmas are fueling debate in Washington over reinstituting some form of draft. Based on the experience of the Vietnam War, however, a considerable layer of the political and military establishment continues to oppose conscription as it would further fuel the widespread domestic opposition to the war and ensure it found far greater reflection within the ranks of the armed forces.

The *Boston Globe* reported on December 26 on one of the more sinister alternatives being considered by the Pentagon: recruiting large numbers of non-US citizens as mercenaries to fight American capitalism’s wars. Already, some 30,000 non-Americans who hold US visas

are serving in the armed forces in exchange for accelerated citizenship. At least 100 have been killed in Afghanistan and Iraq. More open mercenary operations are underway. Thousands of former soldiers have been hired from countries like Britain, South Africa, Nepal and Fiji by private security firms holding US contracts to perform military roles in Iraq, such as defending airports and government buildings.

Advocates of using non-citizens have already gone so far as to suggest establishing recruiting offices in foreign countries. Michael O-Hanlon of the Brookings Institution told the *Globe* that “it’s a little dramatic”, but may be necessary to boost the US military. Max Boot, one of the most prominent neo-conservative advocates of US aggression, declared: “No doubt many would be willing to serve for some set period in return for one of the world’s most precious commodities—US citizenship. Some might deride those who sign up as mercenaries, but these troops would have significantly different motives than the usual soldier of fortune.”

One of the international precedents being cited is the French Foreign Legion. Recruited on the basis of “no-questions asked” and a lengthy term of enlistment—in exchange for citizenship—the Legion was notorious as a refuge for desperate criminals and adventurers who were used to carry out the dirtiest of tasks. After World War II it was used as France’s shock troops against the liberation movements in Vietnam, Algeria and elsewhere. It is currently fighting in Afghanistan.

A major consideration in recruiting non-citizens is to cut the number of American casualties in Iraq. That such a proposal is even being studied testifies to the chasm that exists between the Pentagon war machine and the mass of the American people.



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