

# Bush's war czar floats call for military draft

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The senior military officer tapped by President Bush to serve as his “war czar” declared in a radio interview last Friday that Washington should consider the reimposition of a military draft to relieve the extreme pressure that the ongoing wars and occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan are inflicting on the US military.

“I think it makes sense to certainly consider it,” Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute said in an interview with National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered.”

The general continued: “And I can tell you, this has always been an option on the table. But ultimately, this is a policy matter between meeting the demands for the nation’s security by one means or another.”

The interview, the first given by Lute since he was confirmed by the Senate in June, had all the earmarks of a trial balloon aimed at introducing the idea of once again conscripting young people into the armed forces for America’s colonial-style wars, under conditions in which extended back-to-back combat deployments are steadily wearing down the US military.

Lute, an active-duty general, was confirmed by the US Senate last June to a position that amounts to a sort of liaison between the White House, the military and other civilian agencies involved in the Iraq occupation. At least five prominent retired officers had rejected the post, some openly stating that they considered any attempt to rescue the Iraqi intervention as hopeless. Lute had reportedly long been a critic of the administration’s handling of the war from the standpoint of the strains that it has placed on the American military.

The suggestion that military conscription should be reinstated for the first time since President Richard Nixon suspended the draft 34 years ago under conditions of massive opposition to the war in Vietnam clearly is a political bombshell.

Lute hastened to qualify his remarks, acknowledging that the action would represent a “major policy shift.” Reaffirming the line generally given by both the Bush administration and the Pentagon, he declared, “Today, the current means of the all-volunteer force is serving us exceptionally well.”

White House and Pentagon spokesmen rushed to deny that Lute’s comments were connected to any plans for reviving the draft.

“The president’s position is that the all-volunteer military meets the needs of the country and there is no discussion of a draft. Gen. Lute made that point as well,” said National

Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe.

Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman chimed in, “I can tell you emphatically that there is absolutely no consideration being given to reinstating the draft.” He added, “The all-volunteer force has surpassed all expectations of its founders.”

There is undoubtedly extreme reluctance within both the US military and the ruling elite as a whole to bring back the draft under the present political conditions, in which a decisive majority of the American population opposes the continued deployment of US troops in Iraq. Not only is there the general fear that conscription would incite a political explosion, but within the military brass—most of which is drawn from veterans of America’s ill-fated war in Vietnam—there is deep-seated concern that an army of conscripts in Iraq could enter into the same kind of crisis, decomposition and, in some cases, open revolt that was seen among US troops in Southeast Asia 35 years ago.

There exists, however, an inescapable logic to the reemergence of the draft as a serious subject of policy debate in Washington, even as popular hostility to the war has grown to unprecedented levels, seemingly making conscription politically unthinkable.

On the military side, there are increasing warnings from the top uniformed ranks that the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are “breaking” the army, steadily eroding its most qualified personnel, bringing in recruits that would have been rejected in earlier years and who are inadequately trained, and leaving too few units to maintain these occupations, much less to conduct interventions elsewhere.

Lute referred to the strains placed on the troops. “There’s both a personal dimension of this, where this kind of stress plays out across dinner tables and in living room conversations within these families,” he said. “And ultimately, the health of the all-volunteer force is going to rest on those sorts of personal family decisions.”

The back-to-back deployments and the curtailing of “dwell time,” in which troops are meant to recuperate from combat duty, retrain and reequip, have wreaked havoc on soldiers’ personal lives, with divorce, suicide and alcoholism rates all up sharply.

Meanwhile, one third of those returning from Afghanistan and Iraq to be treated at government facilities have been diagnosed with mental illness. According to the Pentagon’s

own mental health taskforce, the protracted deployments of US troops—considerably longer than combat tours served by soldiers in either Vietnam or World War II—have resulted in 38 percent of regular army soldiers, 31 percent of marines and 49 percent of National Guard troops showing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder within three months of returning from Iraq.

At the same time, the extreme unpopularity of the war has generated a deepening recruitment crisis for the US military. The army was able to meet its July recruitment goal only by adding a \$20,000 sign-up bonus. The incentive, combined with a significant beefing up of the recruiters' ranks, came after two straight months of enlistment shortfalls, with recruiters missing their target by 15 percent in June.

The military has also been forced to drop its recruitment standards. In 2006, for example, just 73 percent of army recruits were high school graduates, compared to over 90 percent two years earlier. At the same time, it has increased the number of so-called waivers for recruits with criminal convictions that would otherwise keep them out of the army by 65 percent since the beginning of the war and has also raised the maximum enlistment age to 42.

The depth of the crisis confronting the US military—and the inability of these stopgap measures to resolve a systemic crisis—was spelled out late last month in Congressional testimony by Lawrence Korb, who served as assistant secretary of defense in charge of manpower from 1981 through 1985 under the Reagan administration.

“The decision to escalate or to ‘surge’ five more brigades and a total of 30,000 more ground troops into Iraq has put additional strain on the ground forces and threatens to leave the United States with a broken force that is unprepared to deal with other threats around the world,” Korb told Congress.

“The simple fact is that the United States currently does not have enough troops who are ready and available for potential contingency missions in places like Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, or anywhere else,” he said.

He charged that the administration's order to extend tours in Iraq and Afghanistan from 12 to 15 months—which he pointed out had not been done even during the Vietnam and Korean wars—as well as the reduction in training given to those sent into combat was placing “unreasonable stress” on American forces.

Korb's experience as the Pentagon official responsible for troop levels lends substantial weight to his remarks—which included his own assertion that a revived draft is required.

He argued that the present deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan represent “a complete misuse of the all-volunteer military.”

This volunteer force, he said, “was designed to act as an initial response force, a force that would be able to repel and counter aggression. If America ever found itself in a protracted ground war, or was forced to act against an existential threat,

the all-volunteer force was to act as a bridge to reinstating conscription. This is why we require young men to register when they turn 18.”

Citing the statement made last fall by Gen. John Abizaid, the former head of the US Central Command, that the all-volunteer military was not “built to sustain a long war,” Korb continued: “Therefore, if the United States is going to have a significant component of its ground forces in Iraq over the next five, 10, 15, or 30 years, then the only correct course is for the president and those supporting this open-ended and escalated presence in Iraq to call for reinstating the draft. That would be the responsible path.”

Korb hastened to make clear that he did not support such an option, but instead believed that the US should conduct a “strategic redeployment,” withdrawing US forces from Iraq over the next 10 to 12 months.

While there is no doubt that the overwhelming majority of the American population supports such a withdrawal, there are increasing indications that no section of the American ruling elite nor the leaderships of the two major political parties is contemplating a withdrawal from Iraq.

What is envisioned is a large-scale military occupation of Iraq for many years to come, precisely the situation that the senior uniformed commanders and military analysts insist requires conscription to adequately sustain.

Whatever their criticisms of the Bush administration's “mismanagement” of the war in Iraq, the Democratic leadership remains committed to the original goals for which this war was launched—establishing US hegemony over the oil-rich Persian Gulf as a means of securing a strategic advantage over Washington's economic rivals in Europe and Asia. In this context, the war is not an aberration but part of a global struggle which poses still more such interventions—in Iran, Venezuela or in other areas of the globe—for which still more young Americans will be needed as cannon fodder.

This is the objective context that gave rise to Lute's remarks, which reflect a far more extensive discussion on military conscription that is unfolding behind the backs of the American people.



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