

US Army reports rising desertion rates

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After a decline in desertion rates following an initial exodus before the preemptive strikes on Afghanistan and Iraq, the military is recording a rise in the number of soldiers who abandon their posts. The Associated Press reported November 16 that desertions this year stand 80 percent higher than in 2003, when the US invaded Iraq.

According to the US Army, 4,698 soldiers—about 9 in every 1,000—deserted in the fiscal year ending September 2007. Over the same period, the Department of Defense reported 1,163 total US deaths and 8,190 wounded. Overall, desertion is the largest cause of personnel attrition—over fatalities and injuries—serious enough to result in military discharge.

A deserter is an active duty service member away from his or her unit without permission for more than 30 days. The Army reports that more than three quarters of its deserters are soldiers in their first term of enlistment.

Roy Wallace, director of plans and resources with the Army, told the Associated Press that soldiers generally exit the military in one of four ways: They are determined unable to meet fitness requirements; they are found to be “unable to adapt to the military”; they violate the so-called “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy prohibiting someone who is gay from revealing their orientation; or they simply go absent without leave and do not report for duty.

For the Army, the desertion rate for 2007 is 42 percent higher than that of the previous year, when 3,301 deserted. In 2005, 2,011 Army soldiers deserted, representing the lowest annual rate of the war period. In 2001 and 2002, the number of desertions was similar to the most recent figures for the Army (4,597 and 4,483, respectively) before they began to decline.

Historically, the military has not actively pursued deserters. Troops who leave their posts are denied veterans benefits and their names are permanently

added to a national database of fugitives. If they are picked up by civilian law enforcement, they are handed over to military police for court martial.

However, Army prosecutions of desertions and other unauthorized absences have greatly increased over the past four years in an attempt to deter other would-be deserters, according to Army lawyers in interviews with the *New York Times* earlier this year. In a report published April 9, the *Times* noted that from 2002 through 2006, the average annual rate of Army prosecutions for desertion was triple the preceding five-year period, and prosecutions of similar absences have doubled. This increase in disciplinary action is an unmistakable acknowledgment by the chain of command that the rise in desertions represents not a fluke but a sign of things to come.

Pointing to the far higher Vietnam-era desertion rates, which rose as high as 5 percent, the military has insisted the current rise in desertion rates has nothing to do either with the so-called war on terror or with mass antiwar sentiments.

According to the Army, lower rates in 2003-2005 were the result of successful efforts to identify soldiers likely to desert during basic training, before they were assigned to their posts.

The current higher desertion rates, the Army insists, are too small an increase to attribute to any factors other than personal or familial stress. As Army planning director Wallace put it for the Associated Press, “We’re asking a lot of soldiers these days. They’re humans. They have all sorts of issues back home and other places like that. So, I’m sure it has to do with the stress of being a soldier.”

What the military will not acknowledge is the obvious connection between “issues back home” and military culture and the war itself. Above all, the open-ended and brutal nature of colonial-style occupation has taken a psychological toll on the soldiers charged with

carrying it out on the ground, as well as on their families and friends in the United States. Consequently, morale among active duty troops is low and stress is very high.

The military has encouraged a dehumanizing attitude in its ranks toward the Iraqi population, which is understandably hostile to the occupying force. A survey conducted a year ago by the Pentagon of soldiers stationed in Iraq found that more than a third thought torture of captured Iraqis was acceptable. The survey also found that destruction of civilian property, assault and abuse of civilians by troops were utterly routine.

The same survey, conducted by the military's Mental Health Advisory Team, found that 40 percent of Iraq-deployed soldiers were concerned about uncertain redeployment dates and extended tours. Lengthened tours of duty exacerbate exhaustion and stress, as well as domestic difficulties. Last year, a quarter of soldiers reported marital problems, and 20 percent were in the process of divorce.

When soldiers return home, there is no guarantee they will not be redeployed even when diagnosed with post-traumatic stress or other psychiatric disorders. Nearly 40 percent of Army and half of National Guard personnel who have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan have been diagnosed with some form of mental illness.

Senior brass readily admit that the military is stretched to the breaking point, even as preparations are drawn up for an expansion of the war into Iran. Yet how to resolve the numbers crisis poses a major policy problem for the current administration and the Democrats, who recognize that a re-institution of the draft would have a devastating effect on public acquiescence of the war.

The great majority of deserters during the Vietnam-era had been conscripted; by comparison, the "all-volunteer" composition of the current military—drawn almost entirely from the poorest layers of the working class and secured with enticements of signing bonuses and college tuition—has undoubtedly acted as a suppressant upon desertion rates.

Since 2003, the Army has greatly relaxed recruitment and enlistment standards in order to wage the two wars and increase numbers for future occupations. Over the past few years, the proportion of Army recruits without high school diplomas has risen from fewer than 10

percent to 24 percent. About 20 percent of current recruits would not have been accepted before the Iraq invasion, including a higher percentage of recruits issued "moral waivers" for criminal records. The Army has also increased monetary inducements for officers, including bonuses of up to \$35,000 to retain sergeants and other mid-level commanders.

Coinciding with the troop surge early this year, the Bush administration called for an additional 65,000 Army troops and 27,000 Marines over the next five years, putting pressure on the military to find volunteers. An analysis by the Congressional Budget Office in April suggested the addition would cost \$65 billion, not including the expense of extra training facilities and likely hospital care.

Earlier this month, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates's senior military assistant, Peter Chiarelli, asserted that the military must be better structured for open-ended occupation. According to a piece by Art Pine in the *National Journal* November 12, Chiarelli wrote, "Like it or not, until further notice the US government has decided that the military largely owns the job of nation-building.... We need to accept this reality instead of resisting it."

The *National Journal* cited Andrew Bacevich, a military analyst at Boston University, who advocated the institution of a "small-scale draft, supplementing the current all-volunteer force with a small cadre of conscripts. One possibility," the *Journal* specified, "making military service an option in a broader program in which young people would be required to do a stint in some kind of 'national service.'"

This proposal has been high on the Democratic Party platform since the 2006 congressional elections. Bacevich told the *Journal*, "A draft would involve a broader spectrum of Americans with the military and would serve as a constraint for policy makers.... But there's a need to begin debating the issue because the heavy lifting for future Iraqs is going to be done by the Army."



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