



Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

Filling the Army's Ranks For the Iraq War

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Some two years into the occupation in Iraq, the U.S. Army faces a serious staffing challenge. As of May 30, 2005, the active-duty Army had missed its recruiting goals for four months in a row. If things do not improve substantially, the service will have only 10 percent of needed enlistees pre-signed for basic training at the beginning of 2006; normally it begins the year with about one-third of its trainees already committed to contracts.¹

To improve its chances with America's young people, the Army has altered its advertising strategy and enlarged the advertising budget, added recruiters, and boosted enlistment bonuses.² Defense leaders hope those measures will improve the recruitment picture enough this year to avert a staffing crisis next year.³ Nevertheless, some experts say that only a military draft can avert disaster.⁴

The operation in Iraq is the military's first long, bloody war since 1973, when the nation ended conscription in favor of an all-volunteer force. Thus it might seem as though a return to compulsory service could fix the problem. But a look at what underlies the Army's recruiting challenges reveals that the American public is highly unlikely to support a return to conscription while the war in Iraq is ongoing. Moreover, a draft cannot solve the Army's immediate problem, since it would take time to turn on the spigot of draftees and train them.

The way to end the Army's staffing problems is to find an honorable end to the war in Iraq. Short of that, the Army will have to make do with remedies similar to the ones it is already undertaking.

The Public Will Not Support a Draft for Iraq

The United States has had an all-volunteer military through most of its history. Until the Cold War, the nation called young men up for compulsory service only for vast wars.⁵ The public supported conscription only to fight wars that were widely popular, and

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continued from page 1 — only when the number of draftees was so large that most eligible young men were required to serve—thus making conscription seem equitable across the population.⁶

Today, neither of those conditions holds. The war in Iraq is increasingly unpopular; and even if the Army were doubled in size to counter the insurgency in Iraq, it would still need only a small fraction of the nation's young people.⁷

Army leaders and recruiters say parental support is key to recruitment.⁸ Unfortunately for recruiters, the share of parents who would recommend military service to their children fell from 42 percent to 25 percent—a 17-point decline—between August 2003 and November 2004.⁹

That drop in parental support tracked very closely the decline in public support for the war in Iraq. Between August 2003 and December 2004, the fraction of Americans who thought the war in Iraq was worth fighting experienced a 15-point decline, from 57 percent to 42 percent.¹⁰

Opposition to the war is taking a particular toll on the participation of black Americans in the military. Until recently, blacks were far more likely than whites to volunteer for the Army.¹¹ Today that is no longer the case.¹² In surveys sponsored by the Army, only 22 percent of young people say they are willing to fight for their country for any cause; black youth especially identify having to fight for a cause they don't support as a barrier to military service.¹³

The 75 percent of parents who would not recommend their children join the military voluntarily are unlikely to want them drafted for Iraq. Recent opinion polls found some 70 percent of Americans opposed a return to the draft.¹⁴ In fact, the U.S. experience during the Vietnam War suggests that a draft would further erode support for the war—and weakened support could spill over to a drop in public support of the Army.¹⁵

Conscription ended in 1973 when presidential authority to induct young men into the armed forces expired; restoring the draft would require an act of Congress. Absent broad popular support for such a move, congressional action seems highly unlikely.

Indeed, on the eve of the Iraq War—when memories of September 11, 2001, were still fresh and public support for invading Iraq was still high—Representative Charles Rangel of New York introduced a bill requiring national service for all young men and women. Recognizing the public antipathy toward conscription, Congress set the bill aside for ten months. Then, one month before the 2004 presidential election, facing campaign charges that President Bush secretly favored the draft, the Republican leadership of the House of Representatives brought the bill to a vote with the intention of killing it. As anticipated, the measure failed, 402 to 2.¹⁶ Given the current level of public skepticism over Iraq, it seems extremely unlikely that Congress would take the issue up again.

With growing concerns over the war fueling the Army's recruitment problems, the best way to improve the service's staffing prospects is not conscription, but a strategic and honorable departure of most American troops from Iraq.

Strategies for Staffing the Force

Absent an end to the war, four strategies can help the Army avert a staffing crisis next year.

- Keep more of the soldiers who already joined;
- Draw more on the other services for staffing and support;
- Get some parents and youth to change their minds about serving; or
- Bring in more of the people who would consider serving but have not signed up.

Keep more of the soldiers who already joined

To the extent that the Army can keep more soldiers who already joined, it will not have to recruit replacements. In contrast to recruitment, retention in the active-duty Army is still solid.¹⁷ In addition, the “stop-loss” policy imposed on all Army units headed for deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan can be viewed as serving this strategy.¹⁸

To encourage enough qualified people to stay, the services offer re-enlistment bonuses to people in military occupations and ranks that experience staffing problems. Early in 2005, the Army opened those bonuses to most soldiers deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, regardless of their occupations or normal reenlistment dates.¹⁹

Retaining more soldiers is not a panacea.

Keeping too many soldiers beyond the point when they would normally leave, rather than replacing them with fresh recruits, can lead to a force that is older than desirable. It can also cause problems for force managers in future years as the smaller-than-normal entry cohorts move through the ranks, and may exacerbate the Army’s already troubling imbalances in staffing across occupations.²⁰ In addition, Army leaders fear that high levels of retention in the active force can rob the Guard and Reserve of new members. Nevertheless, given the poor recruiting picture, it would seem wise for the Army to get as far ahead on retention as it possibly can this year. That might require increasing retention bonuses, relaxing the so-called “up-or-out” rules that normally require soldiers to leave if they are not promoted on time, and emphasizing mentoring programs that let soldiers know their continued sacrifices are needed and appreciated.

Draw more on the other services for staffing and support

The Army taps into the Air Force and Navy both for support units and for individuals. Some 3,000 airmen and sailors are organized into units that provide security, transportation, medical support, and ordinance disposal in support of Army operations in Iraq.²¹ Increasing such cross-service support could help the Army deal with its staffing crunch.

Unfortunately, typical Air Force and Navy training does not prepare members for the dangerous counterinsurgency environment in Iraq. As a result, airmen and sailors in Iraq may be at greater risk than their Army counterparts. The Air Force and Navy are working to rectify that situation through improved training for deploying units.²² If that training is still found to be deficient, the Army might do well to train other services’ individuals or units itself, particularly if recruiting shortfalls leave the Army with excess training capacity.

The Army can also try to attract individuals from the other services. Such inter-service transfers are in the interests of the Air Force and Navy. Both of those services want to reduce their ranks substantially, and the Defense Department has requested authority from Congress to offer cash incentives amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars to entice people to leave.²³

Working in partnership, the Army, Navy, and Air Force instituted Operation Blue-to-Green in June 2004 to facilitate the movement of individual volunteers from the other services directly into the Army. Unfortunately, only a handful of airmen and sailors volunteered to turn in their blue uniforms for green ones during the first year.²⁴

Offering bonuses for individuals willing to make the switch might help; the Senate markup of the defense authoriza-

tion bill for fiscal year 2006 includes a \$2,500 bonus for individuals who volunteer to transfer between services. Much larger bonuses—in line with the Army’s enlistment or reenlistment bonuses—might be needed to attract larger numbers of volunteers to change uniforms. Compared with the separation incentives now under consideration for the Air Force and Navy, such transfer bonuses would be a bargain.

Get some parents and youth to change their minds

The third strategy is to try to change the minds of young people who think military service is not for them or—seemingly more important—the 75 percent of parents who would not recommend military service to their children. To that end, the Army has embarked on a new advertising campaign that targets parents with an appeal to service and patriotism. In addition, the Army has increased spending for advertising, added some 3,000 recruiters, and reached out to schools and neighborhoods where relatively affluent youth were previously believed unlikely to be attracted by the opportunity to serve.

Given weakened public support for the war in Iraq, changing people’s attitudes about service may constitute both the most important and the most difficult path to improved staffing prospects for the Army.

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Bring in more of the people who would consider serving but have not signed up

Adding recruiters and expanding their coverage of schools and neighborhoods is also consistent with the fourth strategy, trying to bring in more of the young people who would consider serving but have not joined the military. In addition, the Army has increased recruitment bonuses and education benefits. Today's recruits are eligible for as much as \$20,000 in direct cash and \$70,000 in college money. The Army has requested an increase in the maximum sign-up bonus to \$40,000.²⁵ Such an increase may be prudent.

Another way to bring in more of the people who are willing to serve is to expand the pool of people who are considered eligible. Critics of this tactic worry that by softening eligibility criteria, the Army may undermine a key advantage of the all-volunteer force: its high quality.

Two measures of troop quality are particularly important to the Defense Department: the fraction of troops with high school diplomas, and the fraction that scored above the median on the military's entrance test of cognitive aptitude, the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT). Some 90 percent of today's Army recruits hold high school diplomas, consistent with the Defense Department's target and better than the Army's record from 1999 to 2003.²⁶ The Defense Department aims to have at least 60 percent of its recruits score above the median on the AFQT. As of May 2005, the Army exceeded that goal by a wide margin: some 72 percent of this year's recruits scored above the median, the same share as in 2003.²⁷ Reductions in that measure from today's high level would hardly be unprecedented. In 1986, at the height of the Reagan era, only 62 percent of new recruits scored above the median, and the fraction dipped again to 65 percent in 1999, when a booming economy made recruiters' jobs difficult.²⁸ Thus, modest declines in these measures of troop quality should not pose serious problems, and could improve the recruiting picture in today's difficult environment:

There Are Options Short of a Draft

In summary, the U.S. Army is involved in its first long, dangerous operation since creation of the all-volunteer military in 1973. Given the depth of emerging public opposition to the war, it is a credit to the Army that recruiting and retention are holding up as well as they are. But recruiters have not met their targets for several months, and today's recruiting challenges will translate into tomorrow's problems in filling the ranks if things do not improve quickly.

The Army hopes that recent changes will bring the needed improvements, but they may not be sufficient. Some experts argue that the only way to fix the problem is to impose compulsory service on the nation's youth.

But trying to institute a draft in the face of deepening public opposition to the war in Iraq would be political folly. In fact, the Army's recruiting shortfall is fueled by growing public concern

that the Iraq war is not worth the price the nation is paying in lives or treasure. The best solution to the recruiting problem is an honorable disengagement from Iraq.

Failing that, the nation has several options to help the Army meet its staffing goals. Any of them will take some time to work—though not as long as to bring in new enlistees under a draft. Thus, it is crucial that civilian and military leaders recognize the potential severity of the problem and take appropriate actions immediately.

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article footnotes

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5 The United States conscripted troops in 1861-1865 (both North and South, Civil War); 1917-1918 (World War I); 1940-1947 (World War II); and 1948-1973 (Cold War).

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7 The Department of Defense needs 190,000 new recruits in 2006, of whom some 161,000 might be males. There will be some 2.11 million 18-year-old male civilians. Thus, the military would need no more than 7.7 percent of civilian 18-year-old males. See Office of the Undersecretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness) (OUSD (P&R)), *Population Representation in the Military Services, Fiscal Year 2003*, Table D-1 (<http://www.defenselink.mil/prhome/poprep2003/>).

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26 Benchmark and current figure from Office of Secretary of Defense; 1999-2003 figures from OUSD (P&R), *Population Representation, Fiscal Year 2003*, Table D-6.

27 Benchmark and May 2005 figure from Office of Secretary of Defense; 2003 figure from OUSD (P&R), *Population Representation, Fiscal Year 2003*, Table D-7.

28 OUSD (P&R), *Population Representation, Fiscal Year 2003*, Table D-7.



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