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The Return of the Draft

With the army desperate for recruits, should college students be packing their bags for Canada?

Uncle Sam wants you. He needs you. He'll bribe you to sign up. He'll strong-arm you to re-enlist. And if that's not enough, he's got a plan to draft you.

In the three decades since the Vietnam War, the "all-volunteer Army" has become a bedrock principle of the American military. "It's a magnificent force," Vice President Dick Cheney declared during the election campaign last fall, "because those serving are ones who signed up to serve." But with the Army and Marines perilously overextended by the war in Iraq, that volunteer foundation is starting to crack. The "weekend warriors" of the Army Reserve and the National Guard now make up almost half the fighting force on the front lines, and young officers in the Reserve are retiring in droves. The Pentagon, which can barely attract enough recruits to maintain current troop levels, has involuntarily extended the enlistments of as many as 100,000 soldiers. Desperate for troops, the Army has lowered its standards to let in twenty-five percent more high school dropouts, and the Marines are now offering as much as \$30,000 to anyone who re-enlists. To understand the scope of the crisis, consider this: The United States is pouring nearly as much money into incentives for new recruits -- almost \$300 million -- as it is into international tsunami relief.

"The Army's maxed out here," says retired Gen. Merrill McPeak, who served as Air Force chief of staff under the first President Bush. "The Defense Department and the president seem to be still operating off the rosy scenario that this will be over soon, that this pain is temporary and therefore we'll just grit our teeth, hunker down and get out on the other side of this. That's a bad assumption." The Bush administration has sworn up and down that it will never reinstate a draft. During the campaign last year, the president dismissed the idea as nothing more than "rumors on the Internets" and declared, "We're not going to have a draft -- period." Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, in an Op-Ed blaming "conspiracy mongers" for "attempting to scare and mislead young Americans," insisted that "the idea of reinstating the draft has never been debated, endorsed,

discussed, theorized, pondered or even whispered by anyone in the Bush administration."

That assertion is demonstrably false. According to an internal Selective Service memo made public under the Freedom of Information Act, the agency's acting director met with two of Rumsfeld's undersecretaries in February 2003 precisely to debate, discuss and ponder a return to the draft. The memo duly notes the administration's aversion to a draft but adds, "Defense manpower officials concede there are critical shortages of military personnel with certain special skills, such as medical personnel, linguists, computer network engineers, etc." The potentially prohibitive cost of "attracting and retaining such personnel for military service," the memo adds, has led "some officials to conclude that, while a conventional draft may never be needed, a draft of men and women possessing these critical skills may be warranted in a future crisis." This new draft, it suggests, could be invoked to meet the needs of both the Pentagon and the Department of Homeland Security.

The memo then proposes, in detail, that the Selective Service be "re-engineered" to cover all Americans -- "men and (for the first time) women" -- ages eighteen to thirty-four. In addition to name, date of birth and Social Security number, young adults would have to provide the agency with details of their specialized skills on an ongoing basis until they passed out of draft jeopardy at age thirty-five. Testifying before Congress two weeks after the meeting, acting director of Selective Service Lewis Brodsky acknowledged that "consultations with senior Defense manpower officials" have spurred the agency to shift its preparations away from a full-scale, Vietnam-style draft of untrained men "to a draft of smaller numbers of critical-skills personnel."

Richard Flahavan, spokesman for Selective Service, tells Rolling Stone that preparing for a skills-based draft is "in fact what we have been doing." For starters, the agency has updated a plan to draft nurses and doctors. But that's not all. "Our thinking was that if we could run a health-care draft in the future," Flahavan says, "then with some very slight tinkering we could change that skill to plumbers or linguists or electrical engineers or whatever the military was short." In other words, if Uncle Sam decides he needs people with your skills, Selective Service has the means to draft you -- and quick.

But experts on military manpower say the focus on drafting personnel with special skills misses the larger point. The Army needs more soldiers, not just more doctors and linguists. "What you've got now is a real shortage of grunts -- guys who can actually carry bayonets," says McPeak. A wholesale draft may be necessary, he adds, "to deal with the situation we've got ourselves into. We've got to have a bigger Army."

Michael O'Hanlon, a military-manpower scholar at the Brookings Institute, believes a return to a full-blown draft will become "unavoidable" if the United States is forced into another war. "Let's say North Korea strikes a deal with Al Qaeda to sell them a nuclear weapon or something," he says. "I frankly don't see how you could fight two wars at the same time with the all-volunteer

approach." If a second Korean War should break out, the United States has reportedly committed to deploying a force of nearly 700,000 to defend South Korea -- almost half of America's entire military.

The politics of the draft are radioactive: Polls show that less than twenty percent of Americans favor forced military service. But conscription has some unlikely champions, including veterans and critics of the administration who are opposed to Bush's war in Iraq. Reinstating the draft, they say, would force every level of society to participate in military service, rather than placing a disproportionate burden on minorities and the working class. African-Americans, who make up roughly thirteen percent of the civilian population, account for twenty-two percent of the armed forces. And the Defense Department acknowledges that recruits are drawn "primarily from families in the middle and lower-middle socioeconomic strata."

A societywide draft would also make it more difficult for politicians to commit troops to battle without popular approval. "The folks making the decisions are committing other people's lives to a war effort that they're not making any sacrifices for," says Charles Sheehan-Miles, who fought in the first Gulf War and now serves as director of Veterans for Common Sense. Under the current all-volunteer system, fewer than a dozen members of Congress have children in the military.

Charlie Moskos, a professor of military sociology at Northwestern University, says the volunteer system also limits the political fallout of unpopular wars. "Without a draft, there's really no antiwar movement," Moskos says. Nearly sixty percent of Americans believe the war in Iraq was a mistake, he notes, but they have no immediate self-interest in taking to the streets because "we're willing to pay people to die for us. It doesn't reflect very well on the character of our society."

Even military recruiters agree that the only way to persuade average Americans to make long-term sacrifices in war is for the children of the elite to put their lives on the line. In a recent meeting with military recruiters, Moskos discussed the crisis in enlistment. "I asked them would they prefer to have their advertising budget tripled or have Jenna Bush join the Army," he says. "They unanimously chose the Jenna option."

One of the few politicians willing to openly advocate a return to the draft is Rep. Charles Rangel, a Democrat from New York, who argues that the current system places an immoral burden on America's underprivileged. "It shouldn't be just the poor and the working poor who find their way into harm's way," he says. In the days leading up to the Iraq war, Rangel introduced a bill to reinstate the draft -- with absolutely no deferments. "If the kids and grandkids of the president and the Cabinet and the Pentagon were vulnerable to going to Iraq, we never would have gone -- no question in my mind," he says. "The closer this thing comes home to Americans, the quicker we'll be out of Iraq."

But instead of exploring how to share the burden more fairly, the military is cooking up new ways to take

says military recruiters have confided in him that they're targeting inner cities and rural areas with high unemployment. In December, the National Guard nearly doubled its enlistment bonus to \$10,000, and the Army is trying to attract urban youth with a marketing campaign called "Taking It to the Streets," which features a pimped-out yellow Hummer and a basketball exhibition replete with free throwback jerseys. President Bush has also signed an executive order allowing legal immigrants to apply for citizenship immediately -- rather than wait five years -- if they volunteer for active duty.

"It's so completely unethical and immoral to induce people that have limited education and limited job ability to have to put themselves in harm's way for ten, twenty or thirty thousand dollars," Rangel says. "Just how broke do you have to be to take advantage of these incentives?" Seducing soldiers with cold cash also unnerves military commanders. "We must consider the point at which we confuse 'volunteer to become an American soldier' with 'mercenary,'" Lt. Gen. James Helmly, the commander of the Army Reserve, wrote in a memo to senior Army leadership in December.

The Reserve, Helmly warns, "is rapidly degenerating into a broken force." The Army National Guard is also in trouble: It missed its recruitment goals of 56,000 by more than 5,000 in fiscal year 2004 and is already 2,000 soldiers short in fiscal 2005. To keep enough boots on the ground, the Pentagon has stopped asking volunteer soldiers to extend their service -- and started demanding it. Using a little-known provision called "stop loss," the military is forcing reservists and guardsmen to remain on active duty indefinitely. "This is an 'all-volunteer Army' with footnotes," says McPeak. "And it's the footnotes that are being held in Iraq against their wishes. If that's not a back-door draft, tell me what is."

David Qualls, who joined the Arkansas National Guard for a year, is one of 40,000 troops in Iraq who have been informed that their enlistment has been extended until December 24th, 2031. "I've served five months past my one-year obligation," says Qualls, the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit challenging the military with breach of contract. "It's time to let me go back to my life. It's a question of fairness, and not only for myself. This is for the thousands of other people that are involuntarily extended in Iraq. Let us go home."

The Army insists that most "stop-lossed" soldiers will be held on the front lines for no longer than eighteen months. But Jules Lobel, an attorney with the Center for Constitutional Rights who is representing eight National Guardsmen in a lawsuit challenging the extensions, says the 2031 date is being used to strong-arm volunteers into re-enlisting. According to Lobel, the military is telling soldiers, "We're giving you a chance to voluntarily re-enlist -- and if you don't do it, we'll screw you. And the first way we'll screw you is to put you in until 2031."

But threatening volunteers, military experts warn, could be the quickest way to ensure a return to the draft. According to O'Hanlon at the Brookings Institute, such "callousness" may make it impossible to recruit new soldiers -- no matter how much money you throw at

recruitment tactics don't do the trick, says Helmly of the Army Reserve, it could "force the nation into an argument" about reinstating the draft.

In the end, it may simply come down to a matter of math. In January, Bush told America's soldiers that "much more will be asked of you" in his second term, even as he openly threatened Iran with military action. Another war, critics warn, would push the all-volunteer force to its breaking point. "This damn thing is just an explosion that's about to happen," says Rangel. Bush officials "can say all they want that they don't want the draft, but there's not going to be that many more buttons to push."

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