

Opposition to Iraq war hitting US military recruitment

Black and female enlistment down sharply

By David Walsh
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Recent reports indicate that growing opposition to the Iraq war, as well as fear of death or injury in a questionable cause, are beginning to have an effect on US Army and National Guard recruitment. This, despite bleak economic prospects for great numbers of youth and more enticing bonuses offered to all recruits.

The Army, which has met its manpower goals every year since 1990, has fallen behind in 2005. Through the first five months of a budget year that begins in October, the army is about 6 percent behind schedule toward fulfilling this year's goal. The Army is not only already stretched thin by the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, it has plans to expand by 30,000 soldiers.

The Army National Guard is having even greater difficulty. The Guard wanted to recruit 63,000 new members this year, in part to make up for a shortfall in 2004. However, four months into the budget year, by the end of January, it had signed up only 12,800 men and women, 24 percent below its target.

The US Marine Corps failed to meet its recruiting goal for the second straight month in February, the first time it has fallen short for two successive months in more than a decade. The Marines missed their objective last month by some 6.5 percent. A spokesman for the US Marine Corps Recruiting Command told a journalist, "It is a challenging recruiting environment right now."

Young blacks and women in particular "are marching away from offers to join the army," according to an article by Robert Burns of Associated Press, a trend that suggests "the military's largest service may be entering a prolonged recruiting slump at a time when it is trying to expand its ranks."

Another article, appearing in the *Washington Post*

,notes that the percentage of new African-American army recruits "has slipped dramatically over the past five years." In fiscal 2000, blacks made up 23.5 percent of army recruits; that number has now fallen to less than 14 percent, a 40 percent decrease. The percentage of female recruits has fallen during that same period by 23 percent, from 22 to 17 percent.

Among blacks, the unpopularity of the war is cited as the primary reason for the drop in enlistment. A report completed in August 2004 by GfK Custom Research on "US Military Image" concluded: "More African Americans identify having to fight for a cause they don't support as a barrier to military service."

Stars and Stripes, the military newspaper, notes that the Defense Department's own survey, conducted last May, indicated that "administration policies and the Iraq war have lowered the propensity of black youth to enlist, particularly in the Army and Marine Corps, the ground forces taking most of the casualties."

The publication quoted the Defense Department's Youth Poll report as saying: "Black youth reported being more negatively affected.... Black youth were less supportive of US troops' presence in Iraq, less likely to feel the war was justified, more disapproving of the Bush administration's handling of foreign affairs and more disapproving of its use of US military forces than were whites or Hispanics."

Interviewed by the *Washington Post*, Edward Dorn, a former US undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, commented, "Whites strongly supported the invasion; blacks did not. It follows that the number of young whites enlisting would go up, while the numbers of young blacks enlisting would go down." With polls showing a solid majority of Americans now

considering the Iraq invasion a mistake, Dorn predicted a troubled future for the army: “This will have an effect on white enlistments in the coming months.”

A study conducted by Millward Brown, a marketing and research firm, found that among all groups, objections to the war, casualties and incidents like the torture scandal at Abu Ghraib prison were taking a toll on recruiting efforts: “Reasons for not considering military service are increasingly based on objections to the Iraq situation and aversion to the military.”

The findings of both the GfK and Millward Brown studies on young people’s attitudes toward the US military cannot be heartening to the political and media establishment. Despite an unprecedented propaganda barrage since the September 11 terrorist attacks, aimed at whipping up the American population into a frenzy about the need to make the world “safe” by conquering it, American youth are increasingly unenthusiastic about the military.

The GfK report, which compares the views of young people in 2000 and 2004, notes that attitudes toward the Army among all groups of American youth have grown more negative in recent years. In their summary of findings, the report’s authors write: “The Army’s recruiting mission in a post 9/11 world is an extremely difficult one.... The option of military service causes inner conflict in today’s youth.... College still ‘wins’ as the preferential choice for most young adults.”

Four in ten youth indicated a willingness “to fight for my country” depending on the cause; only 22 percent indicated a willingness to fight for their country “for any cause.” Only 10 percent thought “everyone should serve in the military.”

The leading single reason—cited by 42 percent—for enlisting in the armed forces, among those not averse to joining, is “money for college.” Duty came in second, with 34 percent, and the opportunity to travel and see the world third, with 21 percent.

Among those opposed to joining, fear “is the biggest barrier to joining the military.” The study observes, “In the past, barriers [to enlisting in the army] were about inconvenience, or preference for another life choice. Now they have switched to something quite different:—fear of death or injury.” Nearly twice as many young men and women in 2004 over four years earlier listed fear of dying, being injured or going to war “as a barrier to military service for them.”

The desire not to die or be injured in a combat zone or even go to war or a combat zone was the leading single factor for not joining the military, cited by 26 percent of those surveyed. Twenty-one percent mentioned hostility to “military life,” and 20 percent—a not insignificant figure—objected to the military as an institution. The latter group did not believe in war or fighting or considered itself “pacifist.”

The drop in recruitment and a growing aversion to the military among young people inevitably raise an issue that none of the above-mentioned articles cared to tackle: conscription. Under conditions of shrinking enlistment in the military and an ever-lengthening list of countries targeted for Washington’s violent and bloody brand of “democratic” makeover, the American ruling elite cannot pursue its worldwide aims without reintroducing compulsory military service.

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