

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

A review of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

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A Return to the Draft?

A Survey of Recent Articles

As U.S. armed forces are stretched ever thinner by the Iraq war and military recruiters fall short of their quotas, fears of a military draft are stirring in America. If the writings of military manpower specialists are any indication, however, those fears are grossly exaggerated. For instance, Charles Moskos, a noted expert in the field who has long advocated mandatory national service, writes in *Orbis* (Fall 2005) that a return to conscription is “highly unlikely.” But the draft talk does point to a serious problem: an apparent mismatch between America’s proclaimed global ambitions and the military manpower needed to sustain them.

“Four years into what the Bush administration describes as an open-ended war, evidence that the [all-volunteer force] has begun to unravel is now incontrovertible,” declares Andrew J. Bacevich, a former army officer who is now a professor of international relations at Boston University. With more than 1,900 U.S. fatalities in Iraq, and polls showing that a majority of Americans now regard the 2003 invasion as a mistake, recruiting is off. Despite inducements that include signing bonuses of up to \$20,000, the active-duty army, the Army Reserve, and the Army National Guard are all struggling to meet their recruiting quotas. It’s an indication, Bacevich writes in *Commonweal* (July 15, 2005), that the administration may be forced

to scale down its ambitions abroad—a welcome development, in his view.

Even if the United States pulled out of Iraq and Afghanistan, however, the strain would not disappear. The active-duty U.S. Army was purposely shrunk from 730,000 soldiers at the end of the Cold War in 1990 to 485,000 today, notes Moskos, who is a professor emeritus of sociology at Northwestern University. Yet since the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the United States has committed troops abroad on a wide variety of missions that hadn’t been anticipated, ranging from intervention in Haiti to humanitarian aid in Indonesia.

What to do? Ironically, most of the calls for conscription, usually as part of a broader scheme for national service, come from Democrats. And most of them are in the relatively small “neoliberal” or New Democrat wing of the party. They see national service as an antidote to the low levels of civic engagement among the young and the inequity of a situation in which few children of the affluent serve in the military. A return to the citizen-soldier tradition would also narrow the growing gulf between the military and civilian society. In “The Case for the Draft,” in *The Washington Monthly* (March 2005), editor in chief Paul Glastris and Philip Carter, an attorney and former army captain, propose a plan under which young

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people would be denied admission to four-year colleges unless they had served for one to two years in a program such as AmeriCorps, in homeland security assignments, or in the armed services, where they could fill support roles.

"There are plenty of arguments for or against" a draft, but "it's just not going to happen," observes Fred Kaplan, author of *The Wizards of Armageddon* (1983) and a columnist for the online magazine *Slate* (June 30, 2005). "Military commanders don't want a draft; they're happy to have, in the All-Volunteer Army, the best-educated, best-tempered, most easily trained soldiers in American history. Politicians don't want a draft, because they know it's the surest route to losing the next election; millions of supportive voters will turn into raging protesters if their little Johnny—or, worse yet, Janie—gets forced into battle."

One answer is to increase the size of the existing all-volunteer force by offering better pay and other inducements. (Currently, the lowest-ranking private with less than two years of service makes \$14,820 annually.) But even the Pentagon doesn't favor that course, note Glastris and Carter. Military leaders know that volunteers often sign on for long careers, and they worry about maintaining public support for the costs of a larger standing army after today's crises are past. It would cost about \$10 billion a year in personnel costs (excluding equipment and training) to add 100,000 troops.

In *Orbis*, Moskos proposes an alternative: recruit college graduates for short (15-month) stints to perform many of the support duties now carried out by reservists on active duty. That would also renew the "citizen-soldier" tradition, and, he argues, it's practical. The recruits would receive generous educational benefits, to pay off student loans, for example. Recruiting just 10 percent of the 1.2 million youths who receive bachelor's degrees every year would be sufficient. A survey Moskos did last fall showed that 11 percent of Northwestern University undergraduates would "very likely" consider such a deal (which specified service as prison guards), and 18 percent said they would "seriously" consider it.

Today's manpower bind partly stems from decisions about the force structure that were made decades ago. Frederick W. Kagan, a military historian at the American Enterprise Institute, observes in *National Security Outlook* (Aug. 2005) that decisions being made today may endanger the nation's future security.

In the 1970s, the military adopted a "Total Force" policy, requiring heavy reliance on Guard and Reserve forces in any major confrontation. Stung by the Vietnam experience, Pentagon leaders thought that the need to mobilize civilian reserves would require future presidents to muster public support before embarking on overseas adventures. That change helped pave the way for the U.S. military's current situation: More than 100,000 Guard and Reserve soldiers are on long-term deployments, and they make up more than 40 percent of the military force in Iraq.

Since Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld took office in 2001, the Pentagon has been pressing to implement a new technology-oriented program of "military transformation." Spurred in part by manpower costs before Iraq, the new approach calls for the long-term development of smaller fighting forces made much more effective by the use of high-tech "intelligence, communications, and targeting systems," and a much-reduced role for reserves both on the battlefield and at home. "Rumsfeld and other senior leaders, including President Bush, have repeatedly declared that 'modernizing' or 'transforming' the U.S. military cannot be slowed or delayed even during the current conflict," notes Kagan. That helps explain the continuing paucity of troops in Iraq.

Kagan worries about the longer-term implications of what he calls Rumsfeld's "ill-advised search for military efficiency." In the post-Iraq future, transformation might allow the nation to avoid the kind of bind it's in today, but drastically slimming down reserve forces assumes "that the American leadership will make no mistakes, the enemy offer no surprises, and the situation proffer no unexpected opportunities," writes Kagan. In essence, it's a bet against the "whole history of warfare."