THE HUMAN ELEMENT

by Charles C. Moskos, Jr., and Peter Braestrup

"I'm telling you," Command Sergeant Major Ronald Hammer told a *New York Times* reporter at Fort Hood, Texas, last spring, "we are so much better today than we were a year ago." Because the Army is signing up better-qualified soldiers and discharging those who do not perform well, the "[one] thing you don't hear," added Sgt. Major Malachi Mitchel, "is that old standard: I came in the Army to keep from going to jail."

This marks a major change. After the demise of the draft, a domestic political casualty of the Vietnam War, in 1973, the nation's armed services suffered well-publicized recruitment and retention problems. One result was low morale and combat capability. A study during the 1970s, for example, showed that more than 20 percent of the U.S. Seventh Army's tank gunners in West Germany facing the Soviets could not properly aim their battlesights. The services were forced to undertake remedial reading programs for their recruits and simplify training manuals to comic book level.

Such trends were especially alarming to the military chiefs in view of the services' shrinking size, the nation's unshrinking overseas commitments, and the demanding new battlefield technology. Since the Korean War, the United States had been developing a "capital-intensive" military force, with a heavy emphasis on high technology, air mobility, communications, flexible tactics, and command and control. Gone were the days of World War II, when the ground and air forces, in particular, relied on *mass* to overcome the foe. Today, to offset the quantitative advantages of its chief adversary, the Soviet Union, in men and weaponry, the United States (like the Israelis) must depend on *quality* in both. Mobile tactics, heat-seeking missiles, new radar, helicopter gunships, more complicated tanks, ships and aircraft—all require smarter fighters and technicians than did the simpler warfare of old.

Since 1980, the Marine Corps, Army, Air Force, and Navy have enjoyed something of a windfall. The dramas of Afghanistan and the Iranian hostage crisis stirred more public support for the military, even in academe; the number of colleges with Army Reserve Officer Training Corps units has grown from 287 to 315 since 1975. Higher recruit pay ($573 per month) and fringe benefits have helped. And above all, the dearth of civilian

jobs, aggravated by the 1982–83 recession, has made a three-year hitch, or even a 20-year service career, attractive to more young Americans.*

Although the Army is the least popular of the services, 86 percent of its enlistees during the first half of fiscal year 1983 were high school graduates, compared with 54 percent in 1980. Efficiency and unit morale have risen; rates of unauthorized absence and desertion have gone down. In fact, the Pentagon is now worried that its brighter recruits may be serving under too many not so bright sergeants and petty officers—those who entered service during the 1970s when enlistment standards were lowered in order to fill up the ranks.†

No More Mutinies

Problems still remain. Contrary to the predictions of the 1970 Gates Commission, which recommended the all-volunteer force, U.S. peacetime military strength has declined from more than 2.6 million men and women in the early 1960s (before Vietnam) to around 2.1 million today, affecting manning levels of U.S. Navy ships and U.S. Army units assigned to back up NATO. Nine of the Army's 16 active divisions, for example, now depend on call-ups of designated Reserve or National Guard units to bring them to full combat strength.

To maintain even the current reduced force level, the four armed services must recruit each year about 350,000 enlisted men—or roughly one in four of all eligible males. Similarly, the end of the draft has hurt recruiting for the National Guard, although organized Ready Reserve units of the Navy, Air Force, and Marines now approach 100 percent of authorized strength.

In both active and reserve units, minority members account for a rising proportion of the enlisted ranks, particularly in Army and Marine Corps rifle companies. Blacks made up 37 percent of all Army entrants in 1980, thrice their proportion of the

*In mid-1983, the unemployment rate for male Americans aged 18 and 19 stood at 21 percent (versus 13 percent in 1978).

†Half of all first term re-enlistees in 1982 were in the Army's lowest mental category (Category IV).

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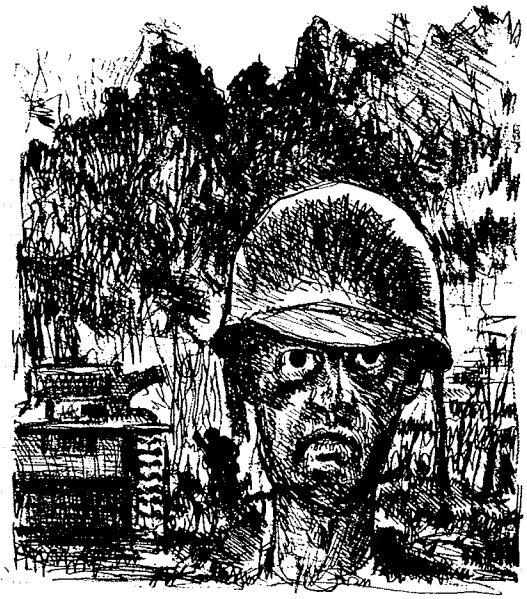

Unlike peacetime military service, war pushes men to their limits. Life*'s Tom Lea sketched an exhausted Marine on Peleliu in the South Pacific in 1944. "His mind had crumbled in battle, and his eyes were like two black empty holes in his head," Lea wrote.*

population as a whole. Yet, during the recent economic recession, more whites have entered the services; only 23 percent of Army recruits were blacks in 1983. Because blacks re-enlist at a 50 percent higher rate than do whites, the percentage of blacks in the Army is still increasing, but at a much lower rate than before. More important, the racial violence that jarred the military during the 1970s (including sabotage and near-mutinies on board Navy aircraft carriers) has receded; black Americans are, increasingly, in leadership positions.*

Still under way is the Pentagon's bold experiment in using more women in more military jobs. With the end of the draft in 1973, Pentagon civilian planners, over the objections of the military chiefs, pushed the recruitment of women as a politically painless way to make up for shortfalls in male enlistments. In the heyday of ERA, Congress did not object. All told, the proportion of women in the ranks rose from one percent in 1973 to nine percent (or 196,000) in 1983, ranging from 11 percent in the Air Force to four percent in the Marine Corps.

*Blacks now account for 25 percent of the Army's senior sergeants, nine percent of the officers; 26 are generals.

NATIONAL SERVICE?

A number of proposals for reviving the draft in various guises have cropped up in Congress and academe since the end of conscription in 1973. Some advocates emphasize equity: Is it fair to rely on marketplace incentives to fill the armed forces' ranks, hence allowing more affluent Americans to avoid service? Or, like France, Sweden, and most other European countries, should the United States insist that every young man do his bit? Others, notably senior military men, deplore the "divorce" between college-educated youths and the experience of service to the nation. Still others believe that reinstating conscription would serve as a clear sign of the U.S. "resolve" that the Reagan administration wants to demonstrate to the Soviets.

A broader notion of "national service," military or civilian, for young men and women seems to have more popular support. In February 1982, Gallup found that 71 percent of its respondents favored some sort of obligatory plan. A study of various plans—and their likely effects on the military, the job market, and college enrollments—has been commissioned by the Ford Foundation for completion by year's end. The foundation's president, Franklin A. Thomas, has suggested that some form of universal service (properly debated, tested, and managed) might not only fill the needs of the armed services for high-quality personnel, but also help local civilian governments. About four million boys and girls now turn 18 each year.

"No one believes that national service will work magic on all its enrollees," Thomas observed. He cited the Pentagon's "mixed success" in uplifting below-average recruits (under Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's "Project 100,000" during the 1960s). Nor, said Thomas, could such a service plan substitute for higher economic growth and better education as a solution to high youth unemployment, especially among minorities. But it might provide a useful and satisfying experience for most of the participants.

On the civilian side, a 1978 Urban Institute study found that without displacing older workers, some three million "real" (not makework) jobs existed that could be filled by college-age youths—in local police and fire protection, public health, forest conservation, day care, tending the elderly. One precedent: the much-praised Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) of the 1930s. As Thomas suggests (and the Pentagon emphasizes), there exist major imponderables in terms of selection, complexity, management, training, costs, and discipline, even if local governments share responsibility and expenses. The crucial test of any national service plan, of course, would be the response of American youth to an official revival of President John F. Kennedy's 1961 appeal: "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country."

Women were admitted to ROTC in 1972 and to the service academies in 1976. The separate branches for women—the Women's Army Corps (WAC), the Women Marines—were abolished: *Integration* was the watchword. By 1978, excepting direct combat roles (e.g., fighter pilots, infantrymen, aircraft carrier crews), most "nontraditional" positions were open to women at home and overseas—to a degree that astonished America's allies, including the Israelis, who restrict army women to rear-echelon duties.

The Army found that its women recruits were better educated (at least during the 1970s), more highly motivated, and less likely to desert than men. Yet, as congressional committees later learned, there were also unforeseen difficulties: "fraternization" between senior males and junior females, disruptive to unit morale; pervasive male resentment, notably at West Point and Annapolis, over perceived "double standards" in discipline and physical requirements. Attrition among women assigned to nontraditional tasks, e.g., driving trucks, was far higher than among women assigned to "traditional" office and health-care jobs. Overall, women enlistees dropped out faster than men.

Readiness for War

The Pentagon also discovered that young women have babies. After 1973, pregnancy was no longer cause for automatic separation from the service. It became common to see obviously pregnant soldiers at missile batteries in West Germany or pregnant sailors aboard Navy supply ships.* Seven to 10 percent of all service women, married or unmarried, become pregnant in the course of a year.

Amid such realities, the push toward a "gender-neutral" military may be ending, although recruiting of women will continue. Congress decided to exclude women from the reinstituted draft registration of 1980. There were few ensuing protests from feminists. In the fall of 1982, male and female Army recruits were again segregated in basic training, following Marine Corps practice, and, during the spring of 1983, certain heavy-duty occupations were again restricted to men. Early reports indicated few complaints from either sex.

In plain fact, the Pentagon, without much protest from Congress but with some bitterness among women officers, has

*In 1979, Jimmy Carter's Army Secretary, Clifford Alexander, warned U.S. commanders in Europe that in case of Soviet attack, they would have to evacuate an estimated 1,700 pregnant Army soldiers from the war zone at once.

quietly decided to put the emphasis on "operational readiness" for war, not new career opportunities for women, whenever the two goals conflict.

As time goes on, the Pentagon's heavy reliance on "marketplace" incentives, i.e., money, and "front loading" of pay may hurt the military's effectiveness. The pay scale for junior enlisted men is now three times greater in constant dollars than it was during the draft era. An 18-year-old recruit, for example, can expect to start earning the annual equivalent of $14,500 (including $8,000 in cash wages) within 12 months. Yet an Army first sergeant, E-8, after 20 years of service, earns only about twice that amount; as he sees it, his relative status has diminished in the all-volunteer force.

A Political Problem

Moreover, the young soldiers' large discretionary income—and more permissive Army regulations—have probably undercut the group cohesion, so vital in wartime, that barracks life used to encourage. A visitor to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, or Fort Hood, Texas, can see the signs: parking lots full of sports cars and stereos in almost every barracks room. Fewer and fewer soldiers eat in the "dining facility," as the old mess hall is now called. Forty percent of Army junior enlisted personnel are married, twice the proportion common during the draft era. More and more soldiers, male or female, rent apartments off base and leave the military environment promptly at 4:30 P.M.

The service chiefs have resisted the Pentagon's post-Vietnam shift to a more "civilian" ethos, even as the Labor Department this year, for the first time, counted service personnel as part of the nation's "labor force." Indeed, the military services have renewed their emphasis on the distinctive "institutional" and "professional" aspects of life in uniform. The Army, for example, is moving toward a British-style "regimental" system, with a permanent home base for the units of each regiment to which they return after, say, a tour in South Korea or Europe. It is also trying to reduce personnel turnover in units, notably among officers. It wants more housing, more services-in-kind, not just more pay, to bind the Army closer together and encourage re-enlistments of needed specialists.

In the long run, such approaches (characteristic of most modern armies) run at odds with the "job"-oriented philosophy of the civilian econometricians who have dominated Pentagon manpower policy since the end of the draft. To hold key technicians, the Pentagon civilians are pressing for pay scales gov-

erned by specialty, not by rank, to reduce "fringes" and services in favor of cash.

Both the econometricians and the military chiefs have yet another contingency to face. The Reagan administration's plans call for a gradual increase in military manpower (from 2.1 million in 1983 to 2.3 million in 1987), mostly for the Air Force and Navy. Yet the annual number of Americans who reach the age of 18 will decline by 20 percent over the next decade, and the current influx of better-quality male recruits is unlikely to continue if economic recovery persists. The question then will be how to preserve (and improve) the quality of service manpower required for America's capital-intensive defense forces.

By one reckoning, just to maintain the *current* strength in 1986–1993 of the active and organized reserve forces (a total of three million men), the military will need to enlist one out of three eligible males—"eligible" meaning able to meet current physical and mental standards. If all college youths are excluded, one out of two eligibles will have to be recruited.

Inevitably, the question of reviving the draft—presumably a two-year draft by lottery with low pay but with some sort of G.I. bill—will come up again shortly. Even as the Defense Department's 1982 military manpower task force contended that any recruiting shortfalls could be overcome by higher cash incentives, it admitted that its assumptions "may not stand up in practice." Yet, resuming the draft, the task force said, would exchange "one set of problems for another," mostly political.

Neither the President, who has publicly opposed reviving the draft, nor his Democratic critics have recently taken up the question. The libertarian Right has regarded peacetime conscription as an unwarranted government curb on individual freedom. The Democratic Left sees a revival of the draft as a prelude to "another Vietnam" (although only 25 percent of those who served in Vietnam were draftees). Public support for a draft has swung widely, as measured by Gallup polls, from 36 percent in 1977 to 59 percent in 1980 (after Afghanistan). Last year, 51 percent favored (and 41 percent opposed) mandatory military *training* followed by eight years in the reserves.

Given the demographics, some sort of service requirement for America's young men seems likely by 1986 unless the White House, Congress, and the public are willing to accept still smaller active and reserve forces, still higher emphasis on pay, or a return to the low-quality, low-readiness days of the 1970s.