

National Security Proposal #1

Restoring Army Recruitment and Retention

Five years of policing a sectarian civil war in Iraq and seven years of reckless stewardship of the military on the part of President Bush have left the Army, in the words of Colin Powell, “about broken.” Good young officers are leaving the service in record numbers. Systemic recruiting and retention problems have forced the Army to lower its standards in filling its enlisted ranks. To fix this problem, we must pass a post-9/11 G.I. Bill, offer loan forgiveness for students who choose military service, and enhance professional development opportunities for America’s officer corps.

THE PROBLEM

The Army struggles to recruit and retain quality troops

The grinding demands of an ill-conceived occupation in Iraq, coupled with a failure on the part of the Bush Administration to support an adequately sized Army after 9/11, have strained our Army to the point of crisis. This has not only undermined our ability to win the war against Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda in Afghanistan, it also has created the risk that our capacity to fight terrorism and respond to unforeseen threats to our security will be compromised for years and decades to come.

Young officers are leaving the service in record numbers.

Junior and mid-level officers, the company-grade commanders who are the “lynchpin” of counterinsurgency operations¹ like the ones we are fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, are leaving the service at staggering rates. The Army is facing a deficit of 3,000 Captains and Majors this year, a shortage expected to double by 2010.²

The long-term impact on the quality of leadership in tomorrow’s Army is alarmingly evident in the escalating departure rate of West Point graduates. Most of the Army’s top leaders today graduated from West Point 30 years ago and have made a career of service in the Army. However, 58% of the West Point Class of 2002 left active duty in 2007 when their initial obligation ended. (This is a 25-year high, up from 46% of the 2001 class and a pre-Iraq War average of 10-30%.)³

Non-commissioned officers are leaving the Army in droves.

Sergeants are the experienced enlisted leaders of the force, directly responsible for the younger troops—they are often called “the backbone of the Army.” Since 2005, the Army has seen a 400% increase in the number of sergeants leaving the military.⁴

Lower standards are weakening the quality of Army enlistees.

The Army missed its 2005 active duty recruiting goal by more than 6,600, and in response it radically lowered standards for new recruits. The service has tripled “moral waivers,” so even those convicted of robbery and aggravated assault can be accepted; they have lowered aptitude qualifications, resulting in many more high-school dropouts in boot camp; and they have eased age and fitness requirements.⁵ As retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey said last year, “drug and alcohol abuse have increased dramatically; word has come down not to flunk anyone out of basic training; and we have increased the age limit to allow 42 year-old-grandmothers to enlist.”⁶

See Appendix B for more data and quotes on the Army’s crisis.

THE SOLUTION

Calling young Americans to service and honoring their service

A Post-9/11 G.I. Bill (Sen. Jim Webb)

Educational benefits through the G.I. Bill are not just part of the debt that we owe to our troops; they are one of the military’s most effective recruiting tools.⁷ The Webb bill would dramatically expand eligibility for the program by making it fully available to activated Guard and Reserve. Moreover, this legislation would provide the benefits merited by a 21st century-caliber military: covering the full cost of tuition, room and board at in-state public schools. This would restore the promise of the original G.I. Bill, which was to fully fund college education for those who serve America in uniform. In so doing, it will communicate both to those presently in the Army and to those considering joining the Army that America honors and values today’s soldiers as much as it did those of the “Greatest Generation” who served in World War II.

Loan forgiveness for college students who choose military service

America needs to call on today’s college students to serve a cause greater than themselves. There are many ways that America’s best and brightest can and should be encouraged to serve their country, but at the very top of the list ought to be the ancient, honorable and vitally important path of military service. Under this program, the military would pay past student loans for most troops on active duty (enlisted and officers below O-5), including reservists and Guard members who are activated during the term of their active service.

Enhanced professional development for America’s 21st century officer corps

To help reverse the tide of promising young combat-experienced Captains out of the ground forces, we should greatly revise and broaden the Army’s successful graduate school program, which provides tuition for a 12–18 month degree in exchange for a longer service commitment. This program would be open to all Army and Marine Captains, and to other branches relative to their retention needs.

See Appendix A for details on this plan, and see Appendix C for information on existing student loan programs.

THE ROLLOUT

Ideas for announcing measures to fix the Bush-era recruitment and retention crisis

Press conference with recipient of original Montgomery GI Bill benefits

Find a World War II veteran to speak about the benefits he received after serving and how those benefits affected his life and his generation. Discuss how the benefit will encourage more people to join the military. Consider holding these events at a VFW or American Legion post, which might also help you identify a veteran for your event.

Press conference/speech with OIF/OEF veterans

Find Iraq and/or Afghanistan veterans who are working to put themselves through college or young officers who left the military to pursue educational opportunity. Have them speak about how they might have stayed in the service if they felt like there was more educational support from the service. Organizations such as Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and VoteVets can be helpful in identifying OIF/OEF veterans in your area.

CRITIQUES AND RESPONSES

The Army crisis and ways to fix it

The Army is not at the “breaking point.”

The Army is not broken, but it is, as General McCaffrey has said, “on the brink of unraveling.” And it’s not just Bush administration critics who are raising the alarm. Last autumn, Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Casey told the Senate that, except for the combat brigades in Iraq and Afghanistan, not one brigade in the entire U.S. Army was currently classified as “Fully Combat-Ready.” In February 2008 he went back to the Hill and said: “The cumulative effects of the last six- plus years at war have left our Army out of balance, consumed by the current fight and unable to do the things we know we need to do to properly sustain our all-volunteer force.”⁸ The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and many others have joined in ringing a four-star alarm about this crisis, but the Bush administration, John McCain and other congressional conservatives have shown a reckless disregard for the military that endangers America’s security.

Saying that the Army is in crisis is an attack on the military that undermines morale and ignores the brave and important work done by our troops every day.

In 2000, President Bush said: “To point out that our military has been overextended, taken for granted and neglected, that’s no criticism of the military. That is criticism of a president and vice president and their record of neglect.”⁹ These proposals would help our troops and strengthen the military by giving it the tools it needs to recruit and retain our high quality troops.

G.I. Bill benefits are already available for military veterans, so this won't help recruitment.

The G.I. Bill is a shell of its original self. Following World War II, the U.S. government offered returning veterans full tuition, housing, and living costs for any college—there was a saying at the time: “If you can get into Harvard, the G.I. bill will pay for Harvard.” Now, veterans who served on active duty receive at most \$9,600 a year for college.¹⁰ National Guard and Reservists who have served combat tours in Iraq usually receive just \$5,280 a year.¹¹ The average in-state costs of a public university in 2007 are \$13,589.¹² Recently separated veterans are beginning to realize that their recruiters' promises of “free college” were a real exaggeration. The Webb G.I. bill would return the program to its original intent—paying the full costs of a veteran's college education.

The Army already has a graduate school benefit, so why would this plan help increase retention?

The Army's program has been successful, with more Captains applying than there are positions. Indeed, this program has shown it can keep more of America's most promising Captains in the Army. But the current program is not retaining enough officers because it isn't big enough – we need to make it much more broadly available to Army officers and others in our military ground forces to encourage them to commit to staying in the service and expanding their educational horizons.

This program will take Army Captains out of combat roles, making the readiness crisis worse.

All captains periodically serve in non-combat positions before getting promoted to Major. This education plan would simply be another option in a successful career path, strengthening a proven retention tool and giving the services a better educated officer corps, which is essential for a modern, effective military.

The Bush administration objects to Senator Webb's GI bill. They say it gives incentives for soldiers to leave the military and use their educational benefits.

It's not surprising that the same civilian leadership that created this problem is attacking the efforts of those who are trying to clean up their mess. As usual, they are taking a short-term view of a long-term problem. Our troops are not leaving the service in record-setting numbers today because they are more anxious than their predecessors to cash in on veterans' benefits, which are far more meager today than they were in the past. They are leaving because years of long and rapid deployments have taken a toll on their personal lives and their families, and because they are dissatisfied with their civilian leadership.

Rigging the system so it is harder to leave the military is no way to reward the sacrifices made by our troops or to convince others to join the military. That is what the Bush administration has been doing for years, using stop-loss to keep soldiers in the military against their will. This has harmed morale and retention over the long run far more than it has helped. Restoring G.I. Bill benefits will reward rather

than punish volunteer service. Ultimately, that is what is needed to draw recruits to the military and convince them to choose to make a career out of military service.

Moreover, there is real evidence that the administration is simply wrong about the impact of the bill—a recent independent assessment found that the Webb G.I. Bill actually would have the net impact of *increasing* the number of troops.^{1***}

*** The independent Congressional Budget Office calculated that Senator's Webb's bill would result in a 16% increase in recruiting and a 16% decrease in retention. The Army and Marine Corps recruited 116,000 new troops in 2007.¹ A 16% increase in those numbers would result in an increase of more than 18,560 new troops. In 2007, the Army and Marine Corps retained 87,473 troops eligible for discharge.¹ A 16% loss in those numbers would mean the service would have lost 13,996 troops. So, the Webb GI bill would immediately result in a net increase of 4,500 new troops.

APPENDIX A

Details on the Proposals

Webb Post-9/11 G.I. Bill

Eligibility:

Includes all military (including Guard and Reservists) who served on active duty a minimum of three months since Sept. 11, 2001.

Benefits:

Full tuition (equal to the most expensive in-state public school), books, fees and a living stipend.

Cost:

\$2.5 billion per year (less than one week of war in Iraq)

NOTE: After WWII, \$7 was generated back to the economy for every \$1 spent by the G.I. Bill.

Loan forgiveness program

Eligibility:

Any officer below O-5 (Lt. Colonel) and any enlisted service member on active duty for a minimum of three months since Sept. 11, 2001.

Benefits:

Government covers student loan payments during time on active duty.

Cost:

Approximately \$435 million per year.¹³

Officers' professional development program

The Army's current graduate school program pays for a 12-18 month advanced degree for 500 captains per year. In exchange, they agree to a 3 year extended commitment to the Army for each year in graduate school. The new program will be open to a much larger pool of officers in the most stressed of the four services: the Army and Marine Corps.

Eligibility:

All Army and Marine captains are eligible for fully paid graduate education. 1,500 Army seats and 750 Marine seats will be available.

Benefits:

Service member would receive fully paid graduate degree and continue to receive military salary and benefits while enrolled. In return, they would agree to a 3 year extended commitment for every year in graduate school.

Cost:

Army personnel managers say that whatever the individual annual tuition fees, they are far less than the cost of training and preparing a new officer.¹⁴

APPENDIX B

Quotes from military's leaders and stats on the Army crisis

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen (Feb. 2008):

"We must get Army deployments down to 12 months as soon as possible. People are tired," fearing that maintaining the current situation could have serious consequences for the military's ability to do its job defending America."¹⁵

Secretary of the Army, Pete Geren (Feb. 2008):

"We are consuming readiness now as quickly as we build it."¹⁶

Army Chief of Staff, General George Casey (Dec. 2007):

"The U.S. Army is out of balance, and out of balance isn't hollow, it's not broken.... But... we're not able to build depth for other things. We're running the all-volunteer force at a pace that is not sustainable... We have to increase our size — and we're doing that... But it will take us three or four years to put ourselves back in balance."¹⁷

General Richard Cody, Army Vice Chief of Staff (Apr. 2008):

"Our rotational goals for a steady security posture of the Army is one year in combat or deployed, three years back for the active force, and one year mobilized and five years back for the reserve component. Continued deployments below these goals will put the all-volunteer force at risk in a time of persistent conflict."¹⁸

Commandant of the Marine Corps, General James Conway (Jan. 2008):

"Our Corps is not big enough [to send 3,200 more Marines to Afghanistan]... We cannot continue to do it without relief elsewhere." He stated that even to fulfill this deployment is to, "take one for the team through October," and short of a complete structural overhaul, the Marines will be tapped-out.¹⁹

General (Ret) Colin Powell (2006):

"The active Army is about broken."

Colonel Carl Castro, US Army Mental Health Expert:

"At no time in our military history have soldiers or Marines been required to serve on the front line for a period of six-seven months, let alone a year, without a significant break in order to recover from the physical, psychological, and emotional demands of war."²⁰

Lt. Colonel Paul Yingling, Deputy Commander, Third Armored Cavalry Regiment:

“Army units don’t fail to train on tasks like language, culture, and intelligence because we’re stupid or lazy; we fail because we don’t have the time to do it right.”²¹

General Robert Magnus, Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps (Apr. 2008):

“The short dwell time at home does not allow our units the time to train on the full spectrum missions needed to be ready for other contingencies. This most directly affects your Marines' proficiency in core competencies such as combined arms and amphibious operations.”²²

The Army Crisis by the Numbers

Recruiting:

The Army missed its 2005 recruiting goals by 6,600. It made its goal in 2006 and 2007, but changed:

- Bonuses: Tripled
- Age: Raised from 35 to 42
- Moral Waivers: Tripled
 - In 2007, 9,000 recruits had criminal records, including 511 with felony convictions)
 - 8% of the Army’s recruits in 2007 received conduct waivers, up 3% from 2006.²³
- Aptitude: 15% drop in recruits with high school diplomas; doubling of recruits with below-average scores in aptitude tests

The Army began FY 2008 with the fewest recruits signed-up for basic training in the history of the all-volunteer force.

Officer Retention:

- The Army is 3,000 short of Captains and Majors,
- West Point grads are leaving at record rates
- Almost all junior and mid-level officers are promoted to make up for the shortfall

Training/Readiness:

- The Army recommends a ratio of deployment-to-rest of 1:3 (1 year deployed; 3 years home for rest, training and preparation).
- The current Army ratio is 5:4, and with the President’s recently announced policy change, it will improve only to 1:1, and not until next year.

APPENDIX C

Existing Military and Civilian federal student loan forgiveness programs

Current Military Programs

Three of the four branches of the military have existing student loan repayment programs. All of them, however, have upper-limits to how much is reimbursed.

Army - Student Loan Repayments Program: For each successfully completed year of enlisted active duty, enlisted soldiers can earn 33 1/3% or \$1,500 (whichever is greater), up to \$21,667 toward the remaining original unpaid principal on all qualifying loans. However, this applies only in critical military occupations, which change quarterly and it pays up to a maximum of \$65,000.

Navy - Student Loan Repayments Program: Enlisted sailors can earn forgiveness of remaining original unpaid principal on qualifying loans, while on active duty. However, this only pays up to \$65,000.

Air Force - The College Loan Repayment Program (CLRP): The maximum CLRP repayment is \$10,000 per recruit.

Civilian Programs

To put the military programs in context, consider two major civilian-focused Federal Student Loan Forgiveness Programs, which exist to reward those who choose to serve their communities and country. One is explicitly designed for teachers in low-income neighborhoods, and the other is for a very broad swath of public service jobs.

Teacher Loan Forgiveness Program: This program is available to those who teach mathematics, science, or special education in "low-income", public (or private, nonprofit) schools as designated by the U.S. Department of Education. They must teach full-time for five consecutive complete academic years in an elementary or secondary school. During this time, they must pay-off their loans on a regular basis. Upon completion of their fifth year of teaching, \$17,500 of their loans are forgiven.

Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program: Last summer, Congress passed the College Cost Reduction and Access Act (CCRAA). Part of this legislation allowed for a many types of public servants to have their college loans forgiven after their first ten years' payments. Students eligible for this program must make the first 120 monthly payments on their loans, while simultaneously employed in a "public service" job. After these first ten years, all remaining interest and principle on the loan is forgiven by the Secretary of Education.

The following is a partial list of eligible public service, full-time jobs: emergency management, government, military service, public safety, law enforcement, public health, public education, social work in a public child or family service agency, public interest law services (including prosecution or public defense or legal advocacy in low-income communities at a nonprofit organization), public child

care, public service for individuals with disabilities, public service for the elderly, public library sciences, school-based library sciences and other school-based services, or at an organization that is described in section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

Endnotes

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¹⁷ Bryce S. Dubee, "Gen. Casey Addresses State of the Army", *The Pacific Stars and Stripes*, Dec. 18, 2007

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¹⁹ Kimberly Johnson, "Conway: 2-front war will overstretch Corps," *Marine Corps Times*, February 4, 2008

²⁰ May 4, 2007 Report of the Office of the Surgeon General of the Army

²¹ Lt. Col. Paul Yingling, "A failure in generalship," available at <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2007/05/2635198>

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