

# Feeling a Draft

Imperial burdens overstretch the All-Volunteer Force.

By Doug Bandow

THREE DECADES AGO the United States inaugurated the All-Volunteer Force. The AVF produced the world's finest military, capable of deterring superpower competitors and destroying regional powers with equal avidity.

Today, however, the U.S. military is under enormous strain. Although the best fighting force on the planet, it lacks sufficient strength to satisfy the demands of an imperial foreign policy. The massive troop rotation in Iraq planned for this spring is necessary but will do nothing to reduce pressure on American servicemen.

The U.S. has managed so far by turning the Reserves and National Guard into *de facto* active-duty units. But the Bush administration risks driving down recruiting and retention for both active and Reserve forces. And some congressmen are already promoting a return to conscription. Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) warns, "The experts are all saying we're going to have to beef up our presence in Iraq. We've failed to convince our allies to send troops, we've extended deployments so morale is sinking, and the president is saying we can't cut and run. So what's left?"

Unfortunately, no relief for the U.S. military is in the offing. About 10,000 U.S. troops remain in Afghanistan. Despite dramatic initial success, Washington now must cope with increasing attacks on coalition soldiers and foreign aid workers outside the capital.

Iraq is of even greater concern. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld once opined that the number of U.S.

troops could fall to 30,000 by fall 2003. But the garrison now numbers 153,000—about 133,000 of whom are American. (Another 34,000 perform support duties in Kuwait.) The coalition has made progress in restoring services and rebuilding infrastructure. Yet far more is involved in the administration's goal of creating a liberal, pro-Western democracy.

Even the capture of Saddam Hussein seems largely irrelevant to combating an increasingly broad-based insurgency. Indeed, Washington may find its task made more difficult since it can no longer argue that Iraqis must choose between the U.S. and Hussein. Moreover, popular attitudes seem far more equivocal than the administration tells. In mid-November, the CIA warned, in a report endorsed by occupation head Paul Bremer, that Iraqis were losing faith in U.S. efforts and policies, creating a fertile environment for the insurgents. One unnamed official told the *New York Times*, "The trend lines are in the wrong direction."

These conflicts are taking a heavy toll on the U.S. military. By November more Americans had died in Iraq after President George W. Bush's May 1 pronouncement that hostilities had ended than had during the war, for a total of 400. At the same time twice as many had been wounded, about 2,000, as had been during the war. Despite the hopes raised by the capture of Saddam Hussein, insurgents continue to kill, maim, and wound U.S. personnel. Moreover, casualties continue in Afghanistan.

Some analysts and politicians profess that the casualties are overrated as a problem. Columnist Alan Caruba cheerfully explains that statistically the average person is more likely to be murdered in Washington, D.C. Rep. George Nethercutt (R-Wash.) observed that what the U.S. is achieving in Iraq "is a better and more important story than losing a couple of soldiers every day."

On the ground, significant frustration mixes with obvious pride. Administration supporters routinely complain that the media are focusing on bad news; the troops, however, seem quite aware of the bad news. A recent poll of 2,000 soldiers by *Stars and Stripes*, a Pentagon-funded newspaper for members of the armed forces, found that 40 percent believed the Iraq mission was unrelated to their training, one-third believed their mission was not clearly defined, and one-third believed the Iraqi war was of limited value.

The administration has designed a rotation plan to bring down the U.S. garrison to about 110,000 this spring. But that will occur "only if the security situation permits," observes Rumsfeld. President George W. Bush also sought to dampen expectations, saying that force levels could fall, stay the same, or increase, "whatever is necessary to secure Iraq." In fact, many analysts believe that more troops are necessary.

But the Pentagon has had trouble finding sufficient soldiers to man its existing commitments. As of late 2003, 21 of 33 active Army combat brigades were committed overseas—16 in Iraq,

two each in Afghanistan and South Korea, and one in the Balkans. Given other duties and refitting, only three were considered fully free for use in new missions.

In order to maintain training standards and troop morale, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) suggests "rotation ratios" of 3.2:1 to 4:1 for active forces and 7.5:1 to 9:1 for Reserve/Guard. Yet of roughly 480,000 Army active duty and 560,000 Army Reserve and Army National Guard forces, 370,000 are deployed overseas. Even this understates the problem. Only about 300,000 active Army personnel and 470,000 Army Reserve/Guard members are in deployable units.

The burden is heaviest on reservists. Some 170,000 reservists, 137,000 of them Army, remain on active duty. In contrast, the average annual call-up during the 1990s was about 10,000 annually. Lt. Gen. H. Steven Blum, chief of the National Guard Bureau, admits, "The weekend warrior is dead."

The military can handle such burdens in a temporary emergency. But speaking only of Afghanistan in March 2002, Secretary Rumsfeld observed, "It's helpful to remember that those who developed the concept for peacekeepers in Bosnia assured everyone that those forces would complete their mission by the end of that year and be home by Christmas. We are now heading into our seventh year of U.S. and international involvement in Bosnia." Thomas Donnelly and Vance Serchuk of the American Enterprise Institute suggest, "The protection of the embryonic Iraqi democracy is a duty that will likely extend for decades." Even President Bush admits that the U.S. faces a "massive and long-term undertaking" in Iraq.

Which brings back Representative Rangel's question: "So what's left?" The most obvious source of manpower is the Iraqis themselves. Unfortunately, this

approach offers no panacea for the United States. Set aside the practical problems in recruiting Iraqis—half of the newly trained Iraqi army deserted in early December, complaining of inadequate pay. The larger and faster the force assembled, the poorer will be its training, the more it will include regime opponents, and the more weapons will be put into Iraqi hands. There is already evidence that Iraqi police trained by Americans have co-ordinated attacks on occupation forces.

Private contractors can help. The U.S. has hired a number of companies to provide security and training in Iraq. But it is impractical to assemble private forces to engage in anti-insurgent operations. And there is a serious problem of accountability and rules of engagement for contractors.

Best would be increased allied support, but little more than dribs and drabs are forthcoming—for instance, 1,000 Japanese soldiers to do humanitarian work (Tokyo has announced that its forces will do nothing to aid allied forces, even if they come under attack) and some Korean soldiers, if the parlia-

admits that many infantrymen will have to serve back-to-back foreign tours. Even though deployment in countries like Britain and Germany is more pleasant than in Afghanistan and Iraq, few people will join and remain in the Army if they rarely see home.

Adding Marine Corps actives, as the Department of Defense (DoD) plans to do this spring, will help. But the Marines are a relatively small force, 175,000, that is intended to respond to unexpected contingencies. Warns the CBO, "If all Marine regiments were either deployed, recovering after deployments, or preparing for deployments ... DoD's ability to quickly deploy substantial combat power in the early phases of an operation would be degraded."

What about the Reserves and National Guard? These troops are intended to supplement the active force in an emergency. Unfortunately, write Philip Gold and Erin Solaro of the Aretea institute, Washington is using reservists "not just as reinforcements for the regulars but as substitutes." The Army Reserve has been mobilized more in the last 12 years, 10 times, than in the previous 75 years, nine

**THE ARMY RESERVE HAS BEEN MOBILIZED MORE IN THE LAST 12 YEARS, 10 TIMES, THAN IN THE PREVIOUS 75 YEARS, NINE TIMES.**

ment approves. The Europeans are reluctant to contribute conscripts to such dangerous duties and understandably hesitate to join an enterprise they originally opposed. As Francois Heisbourg, Director of the Paris-based Foundation for Strategic Research bluntly put it, "I don't think anybody is going to jump into an American-run quagmire."

Thus Iraq will remain largely an American show. Yet the active forces don't have much left. The Pentagon

times. Today Guard and Reserve units handle everything from civil affairs to personnel services.

Extended deployments place a greater burden on reservists than on active-duty forces because the former, who consciously chose not to join the active force, must leave not only family, friends, and community, but also jobs. The burden has been compounded by discrimination against reservists, who often serve longer deployments than

active-duty soldiers but are last on the list to receive the best equipment, such as Kevlar vests. Nevertheless, the military has been pressuring reservists to waive the statutory requirement of 12 months home between overseas deployments.

Where else can bodies be found? When Gen. Eric Shinseki retired as Army Chief of Staff in June, he warned, "Beware the 12-division strategy for a 10-division Army." Support for adding at least two divisions has been building in Congress.

So far the Defense Department has rebuffed such proposals. Adding forces takes money and time. The CBO concludes, "Recruiting, training, and equipping two additional divisions would entail up-front costs of as much as \$18 billion to \$19 billion and would take about five years to accomplish, CBO estimates. In the long run, the cost to operate and sustain these new divisions as a permanent part of the Army's force structure would be about \$6 billion annually (plus between \$3 billion and \$4 billion per year to employ them in Iraq)."

Moreover, the armed services are having trouble not just because excessive and unpleasant commitments make it harder for them to attract and keep enough people. Increasing recruiting and retention requirements actually make the job even tougher.

Publicly, many officials and analysts argue that there is no morale problem. Yet the *Stars and Stripes* survey found that one-third of soldiers said their own morale was low, and half said their units' morale was low. Half said they would not re-up once their tours ended and the DoD's stop-loss order, which bars retirements, was lifted. Moreover, *Stars and Stripes* reported that it was hearing "edgier complaints about inequality among the forces and lack of confidence in their leaders" than the sort of griping common among enlisted personnel.

Morale seems to be improving today but only because those now in Iraq are about to be sent home.

Also critical is the attitude of service families. Worries Fox News Channel commentator Robert Maginnis, "Either we find a fix to rotate those troops out and to keep the families content ... or we're going to suffer what I anticipate is a downturn in retention." Army recruiters are finding increasing resistance from parents, especially when they seek to recruit 17-year-olds.

In fiscal year 2003, which ended Sept. 30, DoD made most of its manpower targets. The Army National Guard and Navy Reserve, however, fell behind their goals; the former ran 87.4 percent and the latter a less worrisome 98.9 percent. Attrition rates remained low, though Defense Undersecretary David Chu admitted, "Certain high-demand (high-use) units and specialties have experienced higher than normal attrition."

But the situation could easily worsen. Secretary Rumsfeld acknowledges, "The effects of a stress on the force are unlikely to be felt immediately; they're much more likely to be felt down the road." Similarly, Les Brownlee, acting Secretary of the Army, worries that DoD might have to wait "some three to six months after these units return" to judge the impact. The effect might take even longer for retentions, since stop-loss remains in effect for some Army active-duty soldiers and many Army Reserve soldiers.

A growing economy, by providing more employment alternatives, could discourage new enlistments. And the longer the Afghanistan and Iraq occupations, the more likely problems are to arise. Beth Asch of the Rand Corporation explains, "Short deployments actually boost enlistments and reenlistments." But "Studies show longer deployments can definitely have a negative impact." Lt. General Blum says that

a fall in recruits and re-enlistees is "the No. 1 thing in my worry book."

So all that's left, in Representative Rangel's view, is renewing the draft. Every recent war has sparked proposals for restarting conscription. Most recently, Representative Rangel and Sen. Fritz Hollings (D-S.C.) introduced legislation to establish a system of conscription-based national service. Moreover, the Selective Service System recently placed a notice on its Web site recruiting for local and appeal boards, sparking a flurry of media stories and administration denials.

From a security standpoint, conscription would be foolish. The U.S. military is the finest on the earth largely because voluntarism allows the Pentagon to be selective, choosing recruits who are smarter and better educated than their civilian counterparts. Enlistees are also selective; they work to succeed in their chosen career rather than to escape forced service. They serve longer terms and re-enlist in higher numbers, increasing the experience and skills of the force.

Since conscription would lower the quality of the U.S. military, draft advocates make other arguments. Rangel maintains that lower socioeconomic groups "make up the overwhelming majority of our nation's armed forces, and that, by and large, those of wealth and position are absent from the ranks of ground troops." Actually, Rangel is wrong. There are fewer children of elites, but the underclass is entirely absent, barred from volunteering. Virtually no one who lacks a high-school diploma or who doesn't score in the top three of five categories of the Armed Forces Quality Test can join. The U.S. military is overwhelmingly middle class; in fact, the test scores and educational achievements of recruits exceed those of young people generally. Blacks are somewhat overrepresented, but they

disproportionately serve in support, not combat arms. Hispanics are underrepresented.

Broader national service makes even less sense. It would divert people from military service to civilian tasks, jail young men and women who prefer not to put their lives at the discretion of political officials, and waste people's lives in frivolous, pork-barrel pursuits. How can one compare picking up cigarette butts in a park with patrolling the streets of Afghanistan?

Although a volunteer military beats a draft force, the Bush administration's foreign policy risks driving down recruiting and retention, which over the long-term could wreck the AVF. If forced to choose between a policy of promiscuous military intervention and freedom, the administration might turn to a draft. Argues *Washington Times* editorial page editor Tony Blankley, it is critical to increase the size of the military, "whether by draft or by voluntary means."

Ironically, Blankley recognizes that voluntarism impedes an interventionist foreign policy—which disproves Representative Rangel's final contention, that "there would be more caution" in going to war if policymakers' children were at risk. The surest barrier to war is not a draft, which allowed the Vietnam War to proceed for years, but the AVF, which empowers average people to say no. A related argument by *Washington Post* columnist David Broder is that a draft would ensure that more leaders served in the military. But conscription would not increase the incidence of military service, which was low throughout American history until World War II and the Cold War. With new accessions in 2003 running only 185,000, the armed services require fewer than 10 percent of male 18-year-olds, and 5 percent of all 18-year-olds, irrespective of how the military is manned.

### **American and British forces are interdicting an important source of income for al-Qaeda:**

heroin produced in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Several men arrested over the past three weeks transporting heroin in the Arabian Sea are believed to be al-Qaeda and are being interrogated. The value of the seized cargoes is a modest \$10 million, but the three vessels captured by coalition naval forces were only a small part of a much larger smuggling operation. Thousands of small, motorized dhows ply the Gulf waters, and most are never boarded or inspected by naval patrols. The poppies are grown in Afghanistan, and the heroin is processed along the Pakistani border in traditional tribal lands lacking permanent central-government presence. British Special Forces are now training an elite Afghan force to destroy heroin laboratories and to interdict narcotics traffic inside Afghanistan, but local farmers will undoubtedly resist violently. Pakistan, alarmed by two nearly successful assassination attempts against President Musharraf, is indicating that it will also co-operate.



### **Local fishermen have discovered and compromised a counter-terrorist operation along the Somali coast.**

Electronic devices on the tiny island of Bur Gaabo near the Somali/Kenyan border have been monitoring suspected al-Qaeda movements. The devices, linked to a satellite, included infrared and other surveillance cameras powered by solar panels as well as sensitive microphones. Bur Gaabo, an uninhabited rocky outcrop, is close to the larger island of Ras Kambona, where U.S. forces had discovered an al-Qaeda arms depot and training camp. Somali fishermen usually do not frequent the area and may have landed in an emergency. The equipment is being retrieved, and al-Qaeda and members of the Islamic Somali Federation are now avoiding the area. Several hundred U.S. Special Forces are based at a nearby French military facility in Djibouti.



### **Karl Rove has decided that aggressive U.S. foreign policy initiatives must be minimized**

in the run-up to the November elections. The Rove political strategy is in response to polling that indicates the American electorate is uneasy over long-term entanglement in Iraq and the prospect of new foreign adventures. There is also a continuing concern over terrorist threats and a "fatigue factor" due to repeated "cry wolf" national alerts. The White House is now willing to lessen confrontation and maintain a quiet dialogue with Iran, while emphasizing support for Iranian so-called moderates. This recognizes that Iran's ayatollahs cannot easily be dislodged and concedes that Tehran has played a relatively constrained role in Iraq. The administration is also suspending hostile action against Syria, whose alleged support of opposition to the American presence in Iraq has irritated administration hardliners. Neoconservatives at the Defense Department and in the vice president's office had proposed an invasion of Syria this spring to topple President Bashar Assad, and the White House appeared to be acquiescent. The neocons, always acutely sensitive to Israeli security concerns, argue that Syria supports terrorist groups Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

*Philip Giraldi, a former CIA Officer, is a partner in Cannistraro Associates, an international security consultancy.*