

Does the U.S. Need a Draft?

The White House says no. But with America tied down in Iraq, military officials say they may need more troops to win this war—and the next one

By **MARK THOMPSON**

OVER THE COURSE OF THE U.S. ADVENTURE in Iraq, military commanders and Bush Administration officials have been united in their insistence that they have enough troops to win the war, despite the fact that parts of the country have slipped out of the control of the U.S. and its Iraqi allies as the insurgency has grown in ferocity. That consensus seemed to crumble when L. Paul Bremer III, former top U.S. official in Iraq, told a West Virginia audience that “we never had enough troops on the ground” to prevent the looting and chaos that wracked Baghdad following the U.S. invasion. Bremer later scrambled to amend his remarks, contending that whatever the shortfalls last spring, the U.S. now has sufficient numbers in Iraq.

The Pentagon is rushing to train 200,000 Iraqi troops to take over combat duties by next August, but meanwhile the U.S. military is trapped in a nation-building marathon that the Army is ill prepared to carry out. Among some Americans, the prospect of an open-ended U.S. commitment in Iraq has heightened anxieties that manpower shortages may lead the Pentagon to reinstitute the draft.

In a *TIME* poll taken before the second presidential debate, 42% of those surveyed said they believe that if Bush is re-elected he will reinstitute the draft, while only 21% believe Kerry would. Pentagon officials, field commanders and both presidential candidates insist a draft is neither necessary nor desirable and that the U.S. can maintain its commitments with an all-volunteer Army. Yet speculation about the return of conscription has become so rampant that House Republicans

tried to dispel the rumors by forcing a vote on a no-hope bill to reinstate the draft. (It lost, 402 to 2.) “We’ve got 295 million people in this country,” Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said before the vote. “We don’t need a draft.”

Maybe not, but there is plenty of evidence that the U.S. does need to find more troops. Deployed in more than 120 nations around the world, from Iraq to Mongolia, the nation’s fighting forces are stretched, by all accounts, to the breaking point. Since 9/11, the number of active-duty and reservist troops deployed overseas has shot up from 203,000 to 500,000. All the Army’s combat brigades have

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been dispatched into war zones over the past two years; some have already gone twice. The demands of war in Iraq and Afghanistan have forced the U.S. to keep some units on a constant combat footing, reducing the recuperation and retraining period that experts say is essential to maintain a first-rate Army.

There are signs that the strain of long deployments and the danger of

serving in Iraq have diminished the appeal of military service. The Army National Guard reported that for the first time in a decade, it fell about 10%—or 5,000 soldiers—short of its annual goal for recruits. The pool of young people who have committed in 2004 to join the Army next year is only 18% of the total required, about half what the Army likes to have banked away. Roughly a third of the 3,900 Individual Ready Reservists mobilized for combat—who thought their days in uniform were over—are resisting the military’s call-up. “These are the cracks that are beginning to show,” Senator Jack Reed, Democrat of Rhode Island and a former Army officer, told *TIME*. “With more deployments, those cracks are going to get bigger. We’re in grave danger of breaking the force.”

SPREAD THIN

Total military personnel	2.6 million
Number of active-duty Army soldiers	500,000
Number of mobilized Reservists and National Guard serving in the Army	145,000
Reservists and National Guard mobilized, by person-days per year, October 2000	12 million
Reservists and National Guard mobilized, by person-days per year, January 2004	63 million
Number of total Army forces deployed overseas, January 2000	203,000
Number of total Army forces deployed overseas, October 2004	500,000
U.S. troops in Iraq, January 2004	122,000
U.S. troops in Iraq, October 2004	137,000
Percentage of troops in Iraq who belong to the Reserves or National Guard	43

What can be done? The Pentagon has applied a host of manpower tourniquets to keep bodies in uniform and on the front lines. For example, the military has issued “stop loss” orders that have prohibited thousands of soldiers at the end of their enlistment obligations from leaving if their units are bound for Iraq, a policy some have likened to a “back-door draft.”

The Bush Administration has resisted calls for expanding the Army and instead has focused on its goal of “transforming” the military into a more mobile, lethal force. Rumsfeld has made clear that he wants no permanent increase in troops for the U.S. Army (though he has okayed a temporary 30,000 hike). He’s pushing a four-pronged offensive designed to give the Army 30% more combat punch without permanently adding soldiers. This plan involves breaking the Army into smaller, more potent units, pulling calcified forces out of cold-war strongholds like Western Europe and South Korea, and shifting military policing and other nation-

building skills from the reserves to the active-duty force. They’re hiring contractors to perform many of the noncombat missions now being done by soldiers, so that those troops can put their fingers on triggers instead of keyboards. The goal is to streamline the military’s cumbersome, costly bureaucracy. Bush summed up the rationale for this push: “We don’t need mass armies anymore.”

Even if the Administration succeeds in remaking the military, the failure to bolster troop levels carries short-term risks. In August, a classified study requested by Rumsfeld concluded that there are “inadequate total numbers” of U.S. troops to maintain the current pace of operations around the world. Some military experts fear that if a crisis erupted with Iran and North Korea, the U.S. would be unable to credibly threaten the use of force because of its obligations in Iraq and Afghanistan. “We can’t respond to another major crisis right now,” says retired Army General Barry McCaffrey.

The Pentagon believes that in a crunch it can bring in more soldier volunteers by offering new recruits higher salaries and benefits and dangling bonuses as high as \$40,000 for highly trained and specialized troops to re-enlist. (The average soldier receives \$7,500.) But given the scale of the U.S. commitment in Iraq and the range of potential conflicts beyond it, a few military experts are beginning to say the U.S. may someday reach a point where it will have no choice but to reconsider the draft. General John Keane, who retired last year as the Army’s No. 2 officer, says the continued success of the all-volunteer military is not guaranteed. “The volunteer force was the most significant military event of the 20th century,” he told TIME. “But it’s not preordained that it will always be there or that it is always going to be successful.” Keane has told Congress that adding more than 50,000 troops to the Army would require thinking about a return to the draft. “If you have worldwide military requirements that demand more people but you don’t have enough volunteers,” Keane says, “then you don’t have a choice.” ■

Questions

1. What is the “back-door draft”?
2. How does Bush want to transform the military?