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Angry Volunteers: Stop-Loss in Today's Army

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Abstract

Since the mid-1970s, the people of the United States have enjoyed the benefits and convenience of an all-volunteer Army. Many generals and politicians hailed the new era of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) as the wave of the future where the problems of drug use and poor discipline so common during the Vietnam War days would be seen no more. But what happens when Americans no longer volunteer in sufficient numbers to adequately support current operations? When a Soldier who plans to leave the Army at the end of his term is forced to remain in uniform as a result of the Army's Stop-Loss policy, he is, in effect, no longer a volunteer.

Angry Volunteers: Stop-Loss in Today's Army

The issue of stop-loss in today's Army is highly controversial. The policy has been hotly debated within the Army's ranks, in the media, and on the floor of the United States Congress. The Army's stop-loss policy, which basically keeps Soldiers in the service beyond the date when they would otherwise leave, has been applied to more than 50,000 Soldiers and reservists since the war in Iraq began in 2003 (Regan, 2006). With the demand for security and peacekeeping operations in Iraq and Afghanistan showing no signs of abating, how long can Army leaders expect to be able to maintain the current pace of operations? Furthermore, how will the Army be able to respond should hostilities break out on the Korean Peninsula or against Iran? The implications of a long-term stop-loss policy are numerous and not without serious consequences.

At the conclusion of his comments at the National Press Club in August, Army Chief of Staff General George Casey was asked if the Army can continue to withstand the heavy burden that it currently bears in Iraq and elsewhere without the aid of a new military draft. He responded: "The demand for our forces exceeds the sustainable supply. Right now, we have in place deployment and mobilization policies that allow us to meet the current demands" (Casey, 2007, p. 8). One of those policies is, of course, stop-loss. General Casey went on to say that "If the demands don't go down over time, it will become increasingly difficult for us to provide the trained and ready forces for those missions that I spoke about" (Casey, 2007, p. 8). In other words, those missions will suffer and possibly fail. General Casey's description of this impending crisis was accurate, if understated. The burden associated with maintaining a sizable and well-trained Army, however, does not belong to the generals; it belongs to the American people and their elected officials. There is something unsavory and, indeed, unethical about the current stop-loss policy. How can a nation of 300 million people continue to place such a

tremendous burden on such a small percentage of its population? Furthermore, what will happen when the burden becomes too great and units fail to function effectively due to severe personnel shortages? The current stop-loss policy is nothing more than a short-term fix that simply ignores reality and avoids addressing a deeper problem.

Since the colonial period, American men and women have volunteered to serve their country in times of crisis and otherwise. This tradition of the volunteer Soldier has been widely lauded by politicians and generals alike. Americans have come to accept it as the normal state of affairs that works well and needs little attention. Only during periods of extreme crisis was a military draft instituted. But such events have been rare in our history, and Americans have regarded compulsory military service as the exception rather than the rule. As a result, any talk of a new military draft is quickly pushed aside and regarded as alarmist. However, American officials must seriously consider the implications of a long-term stop-loss policy. When significant numbers of Soldiers are forced to remain beyond their original terms of service, the notion of the volunteer begins to blur. According to Loren Thompson, a defense analyst at the Lexington Institute think tank:

As the war in Iraq drags on, the Army is accumulating a collection of problems that cumulatively could call into question the viability of an all-volunteer force.

When a service has to repeatedly resort to compelling the retention of people who want to leave, you're edging away from the whole notion of volunteerism

(Regan, 2006, p. 1).

One of the problems referred to above is the record number of desertions, which has reached the highest rate since 1980. According to Army records, 4,698 Soldiers have deserted this year, up from 3,301 last year (The Associated Press, 2007). When one considers the losses in training

resources and time, pay and allowances, and the reality of the vacancies left behind, the total costs are significant. Of course, in this time of war, the unit that the Soldier deserts from bears the brunt of the loss. The unit commander is forced to deal with the negative effects on his Soldiers' morale, and the unit may have no choice but to deploy to a combat zone with a personnel shortage as a result.

When the issues of manpower shortages and stop-loss in the Army today are addressed, the conversation inevitably includes the discussion of a military draft. Americans who lived through the Vietnam era remember the draft as one of the most negative issues of that time. It was a terribly divisive and unpopular policy, and many Americans considered it to be largely unfair. Many officials today are quick to point out that the last thing the Army needs is a return to the days of the draft when desertions, drug addiction, and problems of discipline in the ranks were at all-time highs. They are right to be concerned; however, the truth is that all of these problems exist today in the volunteer Army! As a young sergeant in the 1st Engineer Battalion in 1990, I found myself confronted with all of these problems on the eve of my unit's deployment in support of Operation Desert Shield. In late November of 1990, the announcement was made that a "stop-loss" policy was in effect; most Soldiers in my unit, including myself, did not know what it meant. Once the details became clear, however, consternation soon followed. This sudden understanding, coupled with wild predictions that many thousands of American Soldiers would be killed in Iraq and Kuwait, drove some Soldiers to extreme measures to avoid the deployment. I remember several Soldiers in the battalion who went out and deliberately broke the law in order to be jailed. On the eve of my battalion's departure, two Soldiers in my platoon went AWOL. At the time, I remember hearing similar stories from other units. These events took place in the early 1990s before the post-Desert Storm drawdown a few years later, yet the

problems associated with the stop-loss policy were significant and, perhaps, foreboding. Today, these problems are much greater. The Army has been engaged in Iraq since 2003, and the deployments are showing no signs of letting up.

During a recent address at the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy, Sergeant Major of the Army Kenneth Preston commented that the Army was like a “family business.” In order to illustrate his point, he asked the audience how many had family members who were currently serving or had previously served in the Army. I quickly scanned the audience and observed that at least 90% raised their hands. This was a telling moment. It helps to support my assertion that a disproportionately small number of Americans are shouldering the burden of military service. The fact that many American families honor their tradition of military service and pass it along to the next generation is worthy of praise, and Americans in general should be enormously proud and thankful that this is the case. However, I believe Americans must begin to consider themselves as a distinct family, too. There is a danger inherent in the “let someone else do it” mentality. When taken to the extreme, such an attitude fosters disunity and detachment from a pursuit of the common good.

Stop-loss policy has never before been used for an extended period of time. Indeed, the Army is now marching in unmapped territory and should be concerned about the consequences. Although the Army recently achieved its goal for recruiting during the past fiscal year (2007), it did so only after it lowered its standard for what was considered an acceptable Army recruit. For example, the Army now accepts more recruits who are lacking a high school diploma as well as those who need a waiver for violations of the law. Such trends should concern all of us. The Army’s stop-loss policy is like a self-consuming organism in the sense that it gradually destroys the very resource it needs to survive: namely, the all-volunteer force. The longer it is in place the

greater becomes the desire of Soldiers to get free of it. Additionally, as the policy becomes more and more well-known among the civilian population, the less likely young American men and women will be to volunteer and put themselves at the mercy of such a hated policy. Senator John McCain once referred to stop-loss as a “back-door draft.” Unfortunately, the Army has little choice but to use it so long as the missions in both Iraq and Afghanistan continue. The American people, however, do have a choice; they can choose to recognize and value the time-honored tradition of the volunteer Soldier by embracing it as their own, not just applauding it from afar. Only in this way can the burden of military service be more equitably distributed among the population and the policy of stop-loss shelved for good.

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