



Soldiers in training

New soldiers arriving for their first day of basic training at Fort Jackson, S.C., are "welcomed" by drill sergeants.

GROWING RECRUITING CHALLENGES HARM THE ARMY

The U.S. military is beginning to experience a manpower crisis and a steady erosion of its ability to secure the nation.

Each year, some 4 million Americans turn 18 years of age; just 29 percent can meet the minimum enlistment requirements.

Of the approximately 34 million Americans 17 to 24 years of age, some 24 million are ineligible.

Sheer eligibility is one factor, another is willingness — or propensity — to serve. The propensity to serve is about 15 percent, or 1 million 18-year-olds who are able, but unwilling, to serve.

Aptitude is another key factor. The Department of Defense Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery groups testing results into categories I to V.

The services prefer to recruit from Category I-III, but will recruit from Category IV when they must.

The Army is authorized to enlist up to 4 percent of its recruits each year as Category IVs, people who scored between the 10th and 31st percentile.

Last year, the Army enlisted 63,000 new recruits; 1.9 percent (more than 1,000) were Category IV.

"The Army anticipates problems meeting its 2018 goal to enlist 80,000 qualified volunteers, even with increased bonuses and incentives," according to a February Politico story.

In fact, the Army is offering \$40,000 enlistment bonuses and paid \$424 mil-

lion in enlistment bonuses last year. The Army is also trying to meet its goal by granting "moral waivers" for criminal offenses from drug convictions to arson.

If recruiting goals remain at approximately 80,000 per year for the next three years, and the Army exercises the 4 percent Category IV "standard," in three years (a normal initial enlistment period) we might anticipate an Army with 10,000 Category IV soldiers — a more expensive, less effective Army.

Category IV soldiers are less likely to complete their initial training or their initial term of enlistment. They are harder to train due to lower cognitive skills and literacy. They are less effective.

Training and leading these Category IV soldiers is difficult and time consuming for our Army's overburdened company grade officers and NCO corps.

Indeed, along with the issues that make recruiting a challenge, health issues — in particular obesity — spell trouble.

Each year, the military must recruit about 150,000 enlistees. A return to conscription would mitigate the need to compromise "standards"; in fact, the military could raise standards due to the enlarged pool of recruits.

Another approach (given the unpalatability of conscription) may be to offer graduating students a preparatory program that increases their fitness and aptitude levels with some service

obligation.

The compromising of "standards" is not necessarily the result of malice or incompetence on the part of decision makers. The descent may be explained by a pressure-induced organizational failure called the "normalization of deviance," defined as "the gradual process through which unacceptable practices or standards become acceptable. As the deviant behavior is repeated without catastrophic results, it becomes the social norm of the organization."

The term was popularized by Diane Vaughan in her book, "The Challenger Launch Decision," on the O-ring failure that led to the Challenger disaster.

The potential effect of low-quality recruits is similarly disastrous.

If our national leaders and the American public ignore this normalization of deviance for political, personal or social reasons, it may fall on those of us who have served or are now serving to ask whether the quality of the force is being compromised and therefore less lethal and effective.

What extra risk does that create for those who do "step up"?

Is an Army of compromised standards likely to win America's wars?

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