
Defense Report

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The Search for Better Soldiers—Is It a Way to a Better Army or an Impediment to Recruiting?

For years the Army brought people into its ranks in a way to conform with a Congressional mandate to keep the number of Category IV people (the lowest acceptable aptitude level) below 18 percent of its total strength. The Army seemed to be adhering to that limit quite nicely until it was discovered in 1979 that the testing process had failed and that the actual number of Category IV soldiers had ballooned to 46 percent. Despite claims from the Army's civilian leaders at the time that the service was not troubled by this undetected influx of lower scoring soldiers, Congress reacted swiftly by directing a gradual downward trend in the numbers of Category IV soldiers in the ranks.

This situation has opened an almost non-stop debate between those who want the Army to have the best people available, whether they come in as volunteers or as draftees, and those who are content to accept whatever kind of soldier our hard-pressed recruiting effort can produce. As the allowable level of Category IV declines it will automatically shrink the population with which the recruiters can work, and this problem, in turn, will be heightened by the demographic shrinkage in the overall number of young people reaching service age.

Before they left office, the civilian manpower executives of the Carter Administration had already begun making pleas to Congress to lift the ceiling on Category IV because they saw it as speeding a return to a peacetime draft. The new Reagan Administration is still committed to the "no-draft" position taken during the election campaign and its functionaries have now also begun to press for a higher Category IV ceiling.

The Army's present leaders are caught between the proverbial "rock and a hard place." They would like to have as many recruits as possible in the top three categories of aptitude because the business of soldiering is growing ever more complex. They realize, however, that this makes the recruiters' job far more difficult because they are forced into a position of direct competition with the other services and with civilian employers for the higher scoring young men and women. With no acceptable educational incentive, like a GI Bill, available as a lure to high school graduates who have their sights set on college, all military recruiters are at a disadvantage.

It is the responsibility of Congress to "raise an Army" so our elected representatives must be the ones who make the ultimate choice between the various alternatives. Will they permit a new influx of lower scoring soldiers and then tolerate the heavy turnover as those who cannot adapt are weeded out? Will they keep the quality lid screwed on hard but provide the services with the educational incentive needed to increase the recruiting and retention of high category soldiers? Or will they finally accept what many see as the inevitable solution and draft recruits that represent a true cross section of our society?

The Army will do the best it can with whatever kind of soldier it has, but the better the recruit the easier the training process becomes and the better the Army will be.