
Defense Report

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Service in Our Military Forces — It is Not an Alternative to Welfare or Jail

For many years law-enforcement officers and judges in all parts of the United States offered some youthful offenders the alternative of going to jail or enlisting in one of the military services. This served the purpose of reducing the jail population and, in some cases, military service did have a rehabilitating effect. Fortunately, that practice is now frowned upon by the legal profession. After all, our forces are not operated as minimum security prisons.

But now two counties in Northern California have found still another improper use for the military services. The Siskiyou County Board of Supervisors has approved a welfare department proposal that service in the Army or Coast Guard be considered as job sources for healthy, single males between 17 and 35. The board has ruled that anyone in that category who seeks welfare payments but refuses military service will be stricken from the welfare rolls. Butte County has also initiated a similar plan but has stopped implementing it because it has run into legal problems. Both counties have high unemployment and a large number of people getting welfare.

These plans were uncovered at a time when the Army is already under close scrutiny because of charges in Congress and elsewhere that it has become an employer of last resort, succeeding in its recruiting effort mostly because of the high jobless rate among young people in general and minorities in particular. The military alternative to welfare tends to reinforce fears that our armed forces no longer represent the broad spectrum of our society. It also adds credence to the belief that service in our all-volunteer forces amounts to little more than “. . . just another job.”

The desire of these counties to reduce the size of their welfare and unemployment rolls is understandable, but they have allowed themselves to be trapped by the general lack of public understanding of our military manpower problems. We have long since passed the point in time at which we needed only a few good people to operate the most sophisticated weaponry any defense establishment has ever known. The basis for recruiting our volunteers today should be qualification and desire to serve, not threats of jail or the loss of welfare money.