
Defense Report

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Keeping a Quality Army—Essential to America's Defense

The Army recruiting theme, "Be All You Can Be," has obviously offered the right challenge to many bright young Americans. Over the past four years the Army has been attracting well-qualified recruits, many of them in the combat arms where training and service are the toughest. The Army has been highly successful in signing up high school graduates and young people who score in the highest categories in the mental aptitude tests.

Contributing to the Army's recruiting success story are a 1981 pay raise, which put soldiers pay on a near-par with their civilian contemporaries, generous bonuses for people who completed certain specialty training, and a resurgence of patriotism among young American men and women. In addition, the challenge of better training, discipline and leadership in the Army has helped make soldiering more attractive, both to recruits and to soldiers at the decision point between a military career and life as a civilian.

A large share of the credit for the Army's success should go to Army recruiters who have so diligently applied themselves to the task of placing before our young people the story of Army training, opportunities and challenges. Congress also deserves a salute for making available the resources needed for this achievement.

But three phenomena are occurring which will make recruiting and retaining adequate numbers of high quality people more difficult: the economy is on a modest upswing and is bringing with it improved employment prospects; the number of 17-to 21-year-old males, the prime targets of Army recruiters, is dropping off rapidly; and there is a widening comparability gap between military and civilian pay as a result of "capping" military pay adjustments over the past three years.

These portents of a tougher Army recruiting environment for the next decade mean that the Army will need the wholehearted support of the American people and their elected leaders who must continue to support fully the quality of life improvements, pay comparability and educational incentives that have contributed greatly to our military recruiting success. The obvious alternative is a return to conscription.