

Reclaiming the US Army



By William Pfaff

As the US reaches a situation of political blockage with respect to Iraq, its people must act

A former US Army chief of staff, General Frederick Weyand, once wrote: "The American Army really is a people's army in the sense that it belongs to the American people, who take a jealous and proprietary interest in it . . . In the final analysis, the American army is not so much an arm of the executive branch as it is an arm of the American people."

This relationship of people to army was ultimately responsible for the American withdrawal from Vietnam. The army was the people then, because it was a conscript army — although, unlike in World War II and Korea, it was a corrupt conscription. The poor served, and people like those leading the Bush administration today found that they had "other priorities", as Vice President Dick Cheney once said.

The political class couldn't end the Vietnam war, even after its futility had become evident, because it was morally blackmailed by the war's supporters, who said withdrawal would show the United States "a pitiful helpless giant", and would inspire "totalitarianism and anarchy throughout the world" (I quote Richard Nixon).

The United States approaches a similar situation of political blockage today, with respect to Iraq. A situation exists to which the administration's explanations, expectations and promises are increasingly irrelevant.

Its supporters nonetheless say that a policy of disengagement would be "to cut and run". The Democratic opposition is forced to deny that it would ever cut and run. It is reduced to claiming that it would go on waging the war, but would do it better.

With Vietnam, the political blockage was

ended by what happened inside the army, which was paying the price of the political failure. It began to come apart.

Individual soldiers concluded that their moral contract with the government had been broken, and went home to oppose the war, as John Kerry did.

A mass of soldiers expressed their anger or despair by taking silent AWOL in drug-use, and sometimes by acts of mutiny — "fraggings" (murders of small-unit leaders who pushed their men to keep fighting) — or suicide.

Professionalising the army after 1973 was meant to free it from the limits on its actions and discipline imposed by a constant turnover of civilian-soldiers and temporary officers. The people-army intimacy was to end.

But the new professional force was feasible only if a large volunteer reserve and National

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Guard was made available to back up a deployed professional army. The planners of 1973 did not appreciate that this dependence on reserves would create a more intense relationship between army and civilian society, if a narrower one, than had the old draft.

They took for granted that future American wars would be short and victorious. The reserve forces would serve briefly while the professional army could fight two or three such wars simultaneously, winning all of them.

The United States now is in its second year of fighting two wars, neither of them

victorious, both promising to go on for years to come. The reservists and National Guard members who originally contracted for duty one weekend a month, and two weeks in summer, find themselves locked into active duty that in many cases is already in its second year. Regular soldiers have had their terms of service extended.

The marriages these people left behind, their businesses or professional practices, are under enormous strain or have collapsed. Yet army planners are relying on the National Guard alone to supply 43 percent of the American troops needed in Iraq next year.

Once again there is a widening sense of exploitation and broken moral contracts for a war of still-obscure motivations, interests, and purposes. Resentments and cracks in solidarity and discipline reappear.

Critics of the liberal movie-maker Michael Moore accuse him of "class warfare" because his "Fahrenheit 9/11" says that an American elite is exploiting patriotic volunteer soldiers, usually recruited from the poorest groups in American society, who signed up to learn skills, earn money for education and escape long-term unemployment in dying towns.

These soldiers are disproportionately black (in roughly twice the proportion of African-Americans in the general population). To say this is not class warfare. It is to tell a truth the government neglects to its peril.

Vietnam was a war where those who were selected had to go. Iraq is an affair that now depends on people who originally volunteered but now are being forced to serve multiple 12-month duty tours, in what amounts to their de facto conscription.

As a result, army re-enlistments are dropping; new enlistments in fiscal year 2005 (beginning in October) are expected to fall 10 percent short of the total needed. If the United States means to keep 140,000 troops in Iraq for the next five years, there will be no alternative to reinstating conscription after the presidential inauguration in January.

With that, the American people — however many times they are warned of impending "totalitarianism and anarchy" — may again end the political paralysis and simply say no. They may reclaim the American Army — their army — from its abuse by what they have concluded is a bankrupt political leadership. COURTESY IHT