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Who's Next?

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[from the September 12, 2005 issue]

The US Army Recruiting Command has a motto: "First to contact, first to contract." In the school recruiting handbook the Army gives to the 7,500 recruiters it has trawling the nation these days, the motto crops up so often it serves as a stuttering paean to aggressive new tactics--tactics that target increasingly younger students.

To make sure they are the first folks to contact students about their future plans, Army recruiters are ordered to approach tenth, eleventh and twelfth graders--repeatedly. Army officials spell out the rules of engagement: Recruiters are told to dig in deep at their assigned high schools, to offer their services as assistant football coaches--or basketball coaches or track coaches or wrestling coaches or baseball coaches (interestingly, not softball coaches or volleyball coaches)--to "offer to be a chaperon [sic] or escort for homecoming activities and coronations" (though not thespian ones), to "Deliver donuts and coffee for the faculty once a month," to participate visibly in Hispanic Heritage and Black History Month activities, to "get involved with local Boy Scout troops" (Girl Scouts aren't mentioned), to "offer to be a timekeeper at football games," to "serve as test proctors," to "eat lunch in the school cafeteria several times each month" and to "always remember secretary's week with a card or flowers." They should befriend student leaders and school staff: "Know your student influencers," they are told. "Identify these individuals and develop them as COIs" (centers of influence). After all, "some influential students such as the student president or the captain of the football team may not enlist; however, they can and will provide you with referrals who will enlist." Cast a wide net, recruiters are told. Go for the Jocks, but don't ignore the Brains. "Encourage college-capable individuals to defer their college until they have served in the Army."

Army brass urge recruiters to use a "trimester system of senior contacts," reaching out to high school seniors at three vulnerable points. In the spring, when students' futures loom largest, the handbook advises: "For some it is clear that college is not an option, at least for now. Let them know that the Army can fulfill their college aspirations later on."

Finally, recruiters must follow the vulnerable to college: "Focus on the freshman class [there] because they will have the highest dropout rate. They often lack both the direction and funds to fully pursue their education." (Thus do decreasing federal funds for college complement recruiters' goals.)

"The good [high school] program is a proactive one," the sloganeering commanders remind. "The early bird gets the worm."

Junior ROTC--A Vital Feeder Stream

The Army, which missed its recruiting quotas in four out of the six months ending in July for active-duty troops--and nine out of the past nine months for the Army National Guard--is getting desperate. Still more than 16,000 recruits shy of its 2005 goal, and with disaffected teens plentiful but skeptical, the Army brass has added 1,000 new recruiters to pound the pavement--or linoleum hallways--in the past year. New Junior ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) programs are being introduced in high schools across the country, and lately kids as young as 11 are being invited to join pre-JROTC at their elementary and middle schools. The Army has increased its recruitment campaign budget by

\$500 million this year, and it is slated to introduce a new ad campaign in September emphasizing "patriotism." (In the past, it has focused on job opportunities and personal growth.) The Army hopes Congress will agree to a slew of new signing benefits designed to raise average enlistment bonuses from \$14,000 to \$17,000 (with some recruits getting as much as \$30,000 for hard-to-fill specialties and some re-enlistment bonuses spiking as high as \$75,000).

Sometimes the Army gets even more creative. On the sly, recruiters have helped high schoolers cheat on entrance exams, fudge their drug tests and hide police records, as the *New York Times* reported in May. The *Times* exposé revealed that the Army investigated 1,118 "recruiting improprieties" last year, ranging from coercing young people to lying to them. It substantiated 320 of these.

That such tactics are deemed necessary says a lot about the recruiters' desperation despite their extensive opportunities to engage students at both the college and high school levels. Recruiters' access to college campuses has been protected since 1996 under the Solomon Amendment, which ties federal funding to schools' willingness to permit recruiters on campus. And the military is taking full advantage, especially at community colleges, where students with fewer choices are more likely to consider a military career. Now the military has gained free access to high schools as well, under a little-known clause in the No Child Left Behind Act. Nestled among florid tributes to education reform and clunky legalese is a brief passage stating that all public schools are required to share students' names, addresses and telephone numbers with recruiters. "They have unrestricted access to kids in the schools, cafeterias and classrooms," says Hany Khalil, an organizing coordinator at United for Peace and Justice, a national antiwar coalition. "They've even brought Humvees onto campuses to make the prospect of going to war seem sexy and exciting."

And it works. Not necessarily for the white doctor's son in the suburbs, who can see both Princeton and a Porsche in his future, but for low-income urban youth. In fact, the fewer alternatives a young person has, the better. "The military recruiters are especially targeting working-class youth and communities of color," says Khalil. "These are the communities that don't have access to good schools or good jobs, so it's easier to take advantage of them." Khalil's comments are substantiated by Defense Department population studies showing that most recruits are drawn from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, that 43 percent come from the South (while only 15 percent come from the more populous Northeast) and that only 8 percent of new recruits come from families with a father or mother in the "professions."

On college campuses a different set of tactics is employed--not always with enough care about the truth of financial claims. "My son's recruiter told us that his student loans would be paid in full if he joined the Army," says Kathy Allwein, an administrative assistant in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, whose 21-year-old son was in his third year of college and constantly worried about the \$19,000 student loan he carried when recruiters approached him in 2003. Relieved by the promise of financial help, he immediately signed on the dotted line. After serving ten months in Iraq, he learned the Army would not be paying his loans, because although they were procured through the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency, they were not technically government loans. "We didn't even realize the difference, to be honest," says Allwein. "For a long time the recruiter just told us to be patient and the loans would be paid for. We've been very patient, but when the bill collectors start knocking on the door, it gets a little scary."

Deceived and disillusioned, the Allweins are now getting mail from recruiters trying to sign up their 16-year-old daughter. Fortunately, Allwein, who opposes the Iraq War, has yet to answer the phone and find a recruiter on the other end of the line: "I would tear them from limb to limb," she says.

Seeking to further push recruitment among target populations, the military is expanding its Junior ROTC--a longtime recruitment tool particularly popular in the South and in urban minority communities. Describing JROTC as "adventure training," the military is bringing it to ninety-one new high schools next year. But JROTCs are already an integral part of the formal curriculum in 1,555 high schools, in every state. Taught by retired military--who may or may not have college degrees--the instructors bring what the Army describes as "discipline, leadership training, military history, marksmanship and rifle safety" to 273,000 high school JROTC "cadets" today, up from 231,000 in 1999. Forty-five percent typically enlist after the experience. With the cost of the JROTC teachers' salaries shared by the military and the school district, it's a win-win situation: Cash-strapped schools get bargain-rate teachers for a slew of additional elective courses; the military gets inside the schools for one-on-one contact with potential recruits. In some overburdened public school systems, students are involuntarily placed in the program. Teachers and students in Los Angeles, for example, have complained that high school administrators are enrolling reluctant students in JROTC as an alternative to overcrowded gym classes.

ASVAB--No Child Left Untested

To help high school students find "their rightful place," the Army's standard recruiting tool is the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB). High school juniors and seniors are encouraged to take this test to "identify and explore potentially satisfying occupations." The Army, which encourages high school career counselors to administer the test--ideally, making it mandatory for all juniors or seniors--has stopped spelling out the acronym in the past few years. Many parents and students don't know what it stands for. Carefully described in literature and on websites simply as a "career exploration program," the ASVAB, according to the Army, is "specifically designed to provide recruiters with a source of prequalified leads." Further, "It gives the recruiter the students' Armed Forces Qualification Test scores, military aptitude composites, and career goals. It identifies the best potential prospects for recruitment that allows recruiters to work smarter." It also provides the recruiter with "concrete and personal information about the student"--the better to contact him or her repeatedly.

"My son scored in the top 1 percent of the ASVAB," says Lou Plummer of Fayetteville, North Carolina. "When the recruiters got the scores we got almost nightly calls for a while from the Air Force, the Marines, the Army and the Navy." Plummer, an Army vet himself, encouraged his 17-year-old son, Drew, to heed the recruiters' call and become the fourth generation in their family to serve in the armed forces. "He was an obviously very bright kid, but a slacker who was never into school," Plummer says. "I thought this would be a good opportunity for him to learn a lot." Plummer co-signed, since Drew was under age, and just weeks before the terrorist attacks of September 11, Drew joined the Navy. (Drew has since been "discharged other than honorably," after publicly protesting the US involvement in Iraq, being disciplined for disloyalty as a result and eventually going AWOL.) Lou Plummer has become an outspoken antiwar activist, and he bristles when he continues to get calls from recruiters for his 18-year-old daughter. His advice to similarly harassed parents? "Tell recruiters your child is gay or lesbian," Plummer says. "I've heard that works pretty well."

Meanwhile, confusion swirls around the rules for recruiters. Though parents can sign an "opt out" form that prevents schools from giving out information about their kids to recruiters, and students can decline to take the ASVAB, few families know their rights. According to Arlene Inouye, a speech and language specialist in the Los Angeles Unified School District and a co-founder of Coalition Against Militarism in our Schools, it's not unusual for students to be strong-armed into taking the test. "It's a voluntary test, but students don't know that," she says, describing a situation in which students at Fremont High in South Central Los Angeles didn't realize it was a military test until they walked into the room and saw the uniformed proctors. Nine students refused and were suspended. Later, under pressure, administrators reconsidered and reinstated the students. "A lot of people here are concerned about the issue," Inouye says, "but don't know what to do about it."

Even those inside the military are worried about such tactics, with critics suggesting that in the Army's rush to fill its ranks, it is recruiting those who are ill qualified to serve. (And weeding out poor-performing recruits just got a whole lot harder; in the spring, Army brass moved the decision for discharge up the chain of command--a transparent effort to stop the costly hemorrhaging of marginal recruits.) The Army insists, however, that this is not the case. "No, we haven't lowered the enlistment standards in any way," says Army spokesperson Douglas Smith. According to Army figures for 1999, 90 percent of active-duty recruits were high school grads and 63 percent scored in the top half of the ASVAB; thus far in 2005, 90 percent are still high school grads and 71 percent scored in the top half of the ASVAB.

Playgrounds and Parade Grounds

Today Chicago is the military's rising star. Cementing its reputation as the public school system with the largest military program, it grew last year to include 10,000 teen "cadets" in its elementary, middle and high schools. Chicago has joined Florida and Texas in offering military-run after-school programs to sixth, seventh and eighth graders; the city's youngsters drill with wooden rifles and chant time-honored marching cadences ("I used to date a high school queen/Now I lug an M-16," etc.).

But in Chicago, as in other cities and towns across the country, a coalition of indignant parents, concerned teachers and savvy activists has formed in order to draw attention to the issue. "The local school council was asleep at the switch when the military after-school program was proposed at Goethe Elementary School," says current Goethe school council member Jim Rhodes, who successfully spearheaded a drive to eliminate the program this year. "It didn't

raise any red flags until one of the teachers wrote an impassioned letter about how they were marching with wooden guns and showing how attractive and fun the military could be, to influence these kids to go into JROTC when they got to high school, and then hopefully enlist after that." Even beyond its efforts to seduce kids into the military, Rhodes worried about its educational value. "It was sold to the parents in a presentation as a citizen and leadership program," he said. "But it ended up just being about obedience."

Undaunted by opposition to the military's presence in the schools, Chicago, which already has two military academies and a separate naval academy for high school students, intends to add a second naval academy in September. The new, 600-student Senn High Naval Academy will be jointly run by the Navy and the city. In such schools students are typically uniformed, and military bearing and discipline are required. Designed to promote discipline, citizenship and values among troubled students, they are seen as a solution to a problem for school districts and a pool of potential recruits for the armed services.

JROTC spokesperson Paul Kotakis is quick to clarify that the initiative to create such academies does not come from the military. "In some instances, some academic institutions have decided that JROTC is so worthwhile that they have made it mandatory," he explains. "So when all the students attending the school are required to attend JROTC, the 'academies' are created--and that is a decision made by the individual school, not the Army."

But while school administrators, school boards and politicians may be drawn to the discipline of the JROTC academies, some parents make it a hard sell. When parents in Chicago got wind last year of school board plans to open Senn, they mounted a campaign to stop it. Troubled by press reports indicating that 18 percent of students in Chicago's three military academies join the armed services upon graduation, hundreds of parents and high school students crammed into a school board meeting to protest. But the school board held firm. The members had the support of Chicago Mayor Richard Daley. "I don't know why people are so upset about this idea of discipline and this idea of military service," Daley told the Chicago Sun-Times in December. "I believe in military academies all over this city."

Recruiting Parents--The New Headache

Meanwhile, whether the Army solicits 17-year-old recruits, who require their parents' signature before enlisting, or those who've reached the age of majority, parents--or "adult influencers," in Army parlance--are proving a serious obstacle to recruiting goals. According to a November 2004 Defense Department poll, only 25 percent of parents said they'd encourage their teens to enlist, compared with 42 percent two years ago.

"For the first time, our recruiters are having to really work not only with the applicant but with their family members to explain why enlisting is important not only for the applicant but for the country," says Army Recruiting Command spokesperson Douglas Smith. When pressed by parents about the issue of safety, Smith says, recruiters are forthright. "What they can say is, the young man or woman enlisting is going to receive very good basic and advanced training from the Army. And that Army basic training is designed to prepare every soldier with basic combat skills so they are trained to protect themselves and their fellow soldiers if they're called upon." Recruiters reassure parents that even though the nation is at war, the Army hasn't shortened training or taken any shortcuts with gear or weaponry. "But it's an emotional issue," Smith acknowledges. "And we can't give any guarantees of safety. And we can't say anything to lead someone to think there is such a thing as a truly safe occupation in the Army." In the end, a plea to patriotism seems best. "Ultimately, there is no answer to parents but 'service to country,'" says Smith.

Thus the Army Recruiting Command both tiptoes around the issue of a dangerous war in Iraq and simultaneously insists that American parents need to face the facts and to ante up their children. "What I think we've got to do is articulate to the nation that we're at war, and this is a global struggle, this is a generational struggle," Defense Department spokesperson Col. Gary Keck told the *Army Times* in June. "It's not going to be over in two years. It's going to be with us for many years."

Of course, this message is the opposite of the one the Bush Administration has been sending. Until his June speech at Fort Bragg--in which for the first time he pleaded for recruits by reminding "those watching tonight who are considering a military career [that] there is no higher calling than service in our armed forces"--Bush spent a lot of time downplaying the sacrifices this war would exact from Americans.

The conflict between the military, which would like Bush to turn up the volume by regularly reminding Americans

that we are at war and that war requires sacrifice, and the Administration, which is concerned with the political need to minimize the war's costs, is reflected in the recent linguistic debate over whether to continue calling the current state of affairs a "war on terror" (President Bush) or to shift to broader, less militaristic terms like the "global struggle against violent extremism" (Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld). Though the latter was clunky, it reflected Rumsfeld's response to the Iraq War's decreasing popularity: to recast it as one aspect of an international "struggle" against not just Al Qaeda but all "Islamic extremists." The use of the term "struggle" has the bonus of sounding less violent and more inclusive of nonmilitary tactics. But just as Rumsfeld hopes to fudge things--we're not "at war" per se, just "struggling"--a casualty rate of 18,745 dead and wounded makes it harder to bury the cost of this "struggle."

Historically, what has made Americans willing to sacrifice their lives--or let their children do so--has been the certainty that military action is both unavoidable and necessary to achieve some greater good. Bush tried to make this point in his Fort Bragg speech. "We live in freedom because every generation has produced patriots willing to serve a cause greater than themselves," he said. But the current "struggle" in Iraq is a hard sell; and the current struggle to meet recruiting goals reflects that.