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Military Mirrors Working-Class America

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They left small towns and inner cities, looking for a way out and up, or fled the anonymity of the suburbs, hoping to find themselves. They joined the all-volunteer military, gaining a free education or a marketable skill or just the discipline they knew they would need to get through life.

As the United States engages in its first major land war in a decade, the soldiers, sailors, pilots and others who are risking, and now giving, their lives in Iraq represent a slice of a broad swath of American society — but by no means all of it.

Of the 28 servicemen killed so far, 20 were white, 5 black, 3 Hispanic — proportions that neatly mirror those of the military as a whole. But just one was from a well-to-do family, and with the exception of a Naval Academy alumnus, just one had graduated from an elite college or university.

A survey of the American military's endlessly compiled and analyzed demographics paints a picture of a fighting force that is anything but a cross section of America. With minorities overrepresented and the wealthy and the underclass essentially absent, with political conservatism ascendant in the officer corps and Northeasterners fading from the ranks, America's 1.4 million-strong military seems to resemble the makeup of a two-year commuter or trade school outside Birmingham or Biloxi far more than that of a ghetto or barrio or four-year university in Boston.

Today's servicemen and women may not be Ivy Leaguers, but in fact they are better educated than the population at large: reading scores are a full grade higher for enlisted personnel than for their civilian counterparts of the same age. While whites account for three of five soldiers, the military has become a powerful magnet for blacks, and black women in particular, who now outnumber white women in the Army.

But if the military has become the most successfully integrated institution in society, there is also a kind of voluntary segregation: while whites and blacks seek out careers in communications, intelligence, the medical corps and other specialties in roughly equal numbers, blacks are two and a half times as likely to fill support or administrative roles, while whites are 50 percent more likely to serve in the infantry, gun crews or their naval equivalent.

Sgt. Annette Acevedo, 22, a radio operator from Atlanta, could have gone to college but chose the Army because of all the benefits it offered: travel, health coverage, work experience and independence from her parents. The Army seemed a better opportunity to get started with her life and be a more independent person, she said.

Specialist Markita Scott, 27, a reservist from Columbus, Ga., called up as a personnel clerk in an Army deployment center, says she is now planning to make a career of the Army. "Oh, yes, I am learning a skill," said Specialist Scott, who is black. "I get a lot of papers that are not correct, and so I know I'm

helping the person. It could be making sure the right person is notified in case of an emergency, or maybe I tell them, 'You know, if you do your insurance this way, the money will not go directly to the child, but the child's guardian,' and they say, 'Oh, I don't want it going to my ex.' "

Lt. James Baker, 27, of Shelbyville, Tenn., who is white, enlisted in the National Guard. The Tennessee Guard had no infantry units, so he chose artillery instead. "Artillery is exciting," he said. "I get to blow a lot of stuff up and play in the woods. The Army is the biggest team sport in the world."

Confronted by images of the hardships of overseas deployment and by the stark reality of casualties in Iraq, some have raised questions about the composition of the fighting force and about requiring what is, in essence, a working-class military to fight and die for an affluent America.

"It's just not fair that the people that we ask to fight our wars are people who join the military because of economic conditions, because they have fewer options," said Representative Charles B. Rangel, a Democrat from Manhattan and a Korean War veteran who is calling for restoring the draft.

Some scholars have noted that since the draft was abolished in 1973, the country has begun developing what could be called a warrior class or caste, often perpetuating itself from father or uncle to son or niece, whose political and cultural attitudes do not reflect the diversity found in civilian society — potentially foreshadowing a social schism between those who fight and those who ask them to.

It is an issue that today's soldiers grapple with increasingly as they watch their comrades, even their spouses, deploy to the combat zone. "As it stands right now, the country is riding on the soldiers who volunteer," said Sgt. Barry Perkins, 39, a career military policeman at Fort Benning, Ga. "Everybody else is taking a free ride."

The Way It Was The Vietnam War And the Draft's End

The Vietnam War looms large as the defining epoch in the creation of what has become today's professional, blue-collar military.

It led to the creation of an all-volunteer force, when the Nixon administration, in an attempt to reduce opposition to the war, abolished the draft in 1973.

Because the draft provided deferment to college students, the burden of being sent to Vietnam fell heavily on the less well educated and less affluent. And because of the unpopularity of the war, military service was disdained by many members of the nation's elite, leading their children to lose the propensity to serve that had characterized earlier generations of America's privileged.

As a result, the Americans who fought in the Vietnam War looked very different from the professional corps now fighting in Iraq and stationed around the globe.

The 2,594,000 troops who served in Vietnam between 1965 and 1972 were younger, much less likely to be married and almost entirely male, according to a study of Defense Department data by Richard K. Kolb, the editor and publisher of VFW magazine.

The average soldier in a combat unit in Vietnam was 19 or 20 years old and unmarried, Mr. Kolb said. Of the 58,000 Americans killed in Vietnam, 61 percent were 21 or younger; of the enlisted men killed,

only about 25 percent were married.

"I can only recall one guy I served with who was married, and he was about 30 and a lifer," said Mr. Kolb, who was a 19-year-old radio operator in Vietnam in 1970.

By contrast, the average age of the 28 men killed in the war with Iraq so far is 26, and 8 of the 22 enlisted men who died, or 36 percent, were married.

In the Army, about 25 percent of enlisted men were married in 1973. Today that figure has almost doubled.

Another major difference, of course, is that few women served in Vietnam, and women were not allowed in combat units. Only 7,494 women served in Vietnam, of whom 6,250 were nurses, according to the Defense Department. Of the 58,000 Americans who died in Vietnam, only eight were women, all of them nurses, and only one is officially listed as killed in action.

There were no female prisoners of war in Vietnam. By contrast, one female soldier has already been captured in Iraq and two others are listed as missing in action. Women are enlisting in far greater numbers today, especially since the Pentagon lifted many of the restrictions on women serving in combat. Fifteen percent of all officers and enlisted personnel are women.

The existence of the draft during the Vietnam War, and the war's growing unpopularity as the years passed without victory, also created fundamental differences in the makeup of the armed forces. Soldiers tended to enlist for single tours of duty and then go back quickly to civilian life, making for a higher turnover rate and less professionalism than the Pentagon boasts of now. Today, the average enlistee stays about seven years, up from less than two years in 1973.

But Mr. Kolb and other experts say the widespread idea that the Army in Vietnam was made up mostly of draftees is incorrect. In fact, only 25 percent of all American forces in Vietnam were draftees, compared with 66 percent in World War II.

"With me, it was not a question of whether I would enlist, but when," Mr. Kolb said. "I grew up in a small town, and my father and uncles had all served in World War II. Enlisting was what we did in my family."

Among the many myths of Vietnam that persist today, experts say, is that it was a war fought by poor and black Americans, who died in greater proportions than whites.

Although that was true in the early stages of the American ground war, in 1965 and 1966, when there were large numbers of blacks in frontline combat units, Army and Marine Corps commanders later took steps to reassign black servicemen to other jobs to equalize deaths, according to Col. Harry G. Summers Jr. in "Vietnam War Almanac."

By the end of the war, African-Americans had suffered 12.5 percent of the total deaths in Vietnam, 1 percentage point less than their proportion in the overall population, Colonel Summers wrote.

Servicemen from states in the South had the highest rate of battlefield deaths, 31 per 100,000 of the region's population, Mr. Kolb found. Soldiers from states in the Northeast had the lowest rates, 23.5 deaths per 100,000.

Since the end of the draft, that geographic skew on the battlefield has extended to the services as a whole. The percentages of people from the Northeast and Midwest have dropped, while the proportion from the West has climbed and from the South has skyrocketed — even after accounting for southward and westward population shifts in society at large. For the year ending Sept. 30, 2000, 42 percent of all recruits came from the South.

Over all, Mr. Kolb said, 76 percent of the soldiers in Vietnam were from working-class or lower-income families, while only 23 percent had fathers in professional, managerial or technical occupations.

The disparity created by the Vietnam draft can be seen on the walls of Memorial Hall and Memorial Church at Harvard University, where the names of Harvard students and alumni who died for their country are inscribed. There were 200 Harvard students killed in the Civil War and 697 in World War II, but only 22 in Vietnam.

For Stanley Karnow, the journalist and author of "Vietnam: A History," who began reporting from Vietnam in 1959, the contrast with World War II was personal. When he turned 18 in 1943, he dropped out of Harvard and enlisted in the Army. In 1970, when his son turned 18 and became eligible for the draft, he was also a Harvard student. "We did everything we could to keep him out of the draft," Mr. Karnow said.

Signing Up
Recruiting Office
As Melting Pot

If the nation's wealthy and more well-educated youth have shunned the military, others less privileged have gravitated toward it.

Compared to their contemporaries in civilian life, the armed forces have a greater percentage of minorities, a higher proportion of high school graduates and better reading levels. As a group, about 60 percent of enlisted men and women are white; they tend to be married and upwardly mobile, but to come from families without the resources to send them to college.

While blacks make up about 12.7 per cent of the same-age civilian population, they constitute about 22 per cent of enlisted personnel. Perhaps most striking is the number of enlisted women who are black: more than 35 percent, according to Pentagon figures, indicating not only that black women enlist at higher rates, but that they stay in the military longer. In the Army, in fact, half of all enlisted women are black, outnumbering whites, who account for 38 percent.

In Chicago Heights, Ill., the Marine Corps recruiting office was filled on Wednesday with the huffs and puffs of more than a dozen fresh young recruits, mostly wearing buzz cuts, doing crunches and chin-ups.

The afternoon workout is a ritual for these newest marines, a gregarious group made up mainly of 17- and 18-year-olds who still have to get fitted for prom tuxes and graduate from high school before shipping out in just a few months. They resemble the American melting pot: Hispanics, blacks, whites, young men and one young woman.

Patriotism and the prospect of getting a chance to go to Iraq, where the action is, played a role in their decisions to enlist, the recruits said. But Lori Luckey, 24, a single mother of three girls, said the main reasons she signed up for the Marines were to get a chance at a career and the opportunity for

advancement, to see the world, and to obtain a dental plan and other benefits.

Others, like Myles Tweedy, 18, a high school senior whose baby face is adorned with a goatee, said joining the military was a family tradition. Mr. Tweedy's father was an infantryman in Vietnam, and his grandfather was in the Army as well. "Now it's my turn," Mr. Tweedy said. "It's something I knew I was always going to do."

Jonathan Lewis, 18, who said he enlisted for the benefits, and out of a sense of patriotism, said he figured he had less to fear as a marine in Baghdad than in the streets of Chicago, where he lived for 12 years until his family moved to the south suburbs.

"Being over in Baghdad, you've got a thousand people 100 percent behind you," he said. "Around here, who says you can't be going to McDonald's and that's it? Over there, you're part of everybody, you're with your friends and family, you're still safe."

Ms. Luckey has already made plans for her two oldest daughters, 6 and 4, to stay with their paternal grandmother when she leaves in May for 16 weeks of basic training. Her youngest daughter, not yet 2, will stay with Ms. Luckey's mother.

A corrections officer for six years, she says her job "was just so dead-end." She decided to resign in November and enlisted in the Marines, eyeing not just the benefits but also a fairer chance of advancement.

The Race Issue Equal Opportunity On the Battlefield

Though Hispanics are underrepresented in the military, their numbers are growing rapidly. Even as the total number of military personnel dropped 23 percent over the last decade, the number of Hispanics in uniform grew to 118,000 from 90,600, a jump of about 30 percent.

While blacks tend to be more heavily represented in administrative and support functions, a new study shows that Hispanics, like whites, are much more likely to serve in combat operations. But those Hispanics in combat jobs tend to be infantry grunts, particularly in the Marine Corps, rather than fighter or bomber pilots.

"The Air Force is substantially more white, and the officer corps is substantially more white than Latino," said Roberto Suro, director of the Pew Hispanic Center, which issued a report last week on Hispanics in the military. "So you won't see Latinos flying airplanes over Iraq."

There are as many explanations for why Hispanics are flocking to the armed forces as there are individuals — but the explanations are not that different.

Specialist Joel Flores joined the Army five years ago on an impulse. Already in his late 20's, married and the father of two daughters, he was fed up with his sales clerk job at a crafts store in San Antonio, where he had worked for nine years. "They kept passing me up for management," Specialist Flores, 34, said. "I got tired of it."

So one Friday after work he walked into a recruitment office to ask about his options in the military. Two hours later he was signing papers to enlist. "When I saw that first paycheck, it was 'Oh my God,'" said Specialist Flores, now an Army cook. His take-home pay was half what he had made at the store.

But he says he does not regret his decision even now, when he is among more than 12,000 troops waiting to depart Fort Hood, Tex., for the war in the Persian Gulf.

Specialist Flores, who was born in Texas to Mexican-American parents and was the first person in his family to join the military, has since re-enlisted. He says he has found a more level playing field in the Army than in the outside world. He has moved up a few notches, from private to a specialist supervising other cooks, and says he wants to retire after reaching sergeant major.

In the Army, he said, "It doesn't matter who you are if you can do the job."

For many soldiers like Specialist Flores, the military has not disappointed. Some complain about the low pay compared to what they could be making in the private sector, as well as the long hours and the time they spend away from their families while undergoing training. But they say they have found a more egalitarian and racially harmonious society, one in which prejudice is trumped by meritocracy, discipline and the need to get along to survive.

Sgt. Nathalie Williams, 29, said that in her hometown, Tuskegee, Ala., her closest friends would probably be black, like her. At Fort Hood, they are black, Puerto Rican and white. "You can't judge somebody by their skin color," she said. "That one person who you don't like could be the person who saves your life."

Sergeant Williams's father served in the military, and an older sister is also in the Army. She said she joined the Army in 1992, after graduating from high school, to seek exposure to different kinds of people and travel. A dream came true when she was posted in Hawaii for three years.

But Sergeant Williams, the wife of a nursing assistant and the mother of three children, now faces going to war. Her sister, a staff sergeant, is already in Kuwait.

Sergeant Williams said she had enlisted so she could finish her education — she was a computer information systems major — and then "enjoy civilian life." Instead, at 31, she is preparing for war as a communications specialist and putting on a brave face.

"To me, it's a job," she said. "I didn't anticipate it, but if I have to go I have to go. It's not a big deal. I believe it was meant for me to be here."

What Lies Ahead A New Draft Or a Warrior Caste?

For those who support a return to the military draft, the question is whether the wealthy and elite of America — the sons and daughters of members of Congress, among others — were meant to serve as well.

Charles C. Moskos, a professor of sociology at Northwestern University who has written extensively in support of a national draft for the armed services, domestic security and civilian service, argues that the military must represent every stratum of society.

"In World Wars I and II, the British nobility had a higher killed-in-action rate than the working class,"

he said. "Our enlisted ranks resemble the British: they're lower- to middle-class, working-class, intelligent people, who are joining for both the adventure and economic opportunity. But the officer corps today does not represent American nobility. These are not people who are going to be future congressmen or senators. The number of veterans in the Senate and the House is dropping every year. It shows you that our upper class no longer serves."

Dr. Moskos said the pitfalls of having leaders who do not share in the casualties of war were common knowledge in Homeric times: "Agamemnon was willing to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia," he said. Today's military recruiters, he said, grasp what the ancient Greeks understood — "that nobody'll accept casualties unless the elite are willing to put their own children's lives on the line."

"I once addressed a group of recruiters and asked them, would you prefer to have your advertising budget tripled or see Chelsea Clinton joining the Army — and they all said Chelsea Clinton joining the Army," he said. "That would be the signal that America was serious about joining the military. Imagine Jenna Bush joining the military — that would be the signal thing saying, this is a cause worth dying for."

Dr. Moskos says support for the Vietnam War ended when it became possible for the elite to win draft deferments. Other experts on military demographics dispute this.

James Burk, a professor of sociology at Texas A&M University, acknowledged that few wealthy citizens today choose military service. "But if you say, is the all-volunteer force not representative of the country as a whole, I'd say it's more representative than the upper class," he said.

Dr. Moskos and others also suggest that the citizen soldier who serves out his term and then returns to civilian life is being replaced by a class, or caste, of career soldiers — even in frontline combat positions that do not require the expertise and experience of years of service. On top of that, experts say, members of the military are far more likely to have parents who served in the armed forces, suggesting that such a caste is self-perpetuating.

"To carry the logic further, why don't you hire a foreign legion and be done with it?" Dr. Moskos said. "Go out, hire foreigners, say they can join the American military and get a decent salary. Oh, no — maybe Americans should fight for America?"

Those who warn of a warrior class cite a study by the Triangle Institute for Security Studies in North Carolina showing that between 1976 and 1996 the percentage of military officers who saw themselves as nonpartisan or politically independent fell from more than 50 percent to less than 20 percent. The main beneficiary of this shift has been the Republican Party.

"The officer corps has always been more conservative," said Richard H. Kohn, a professor of military history at the University of North Carolina. "But even so, the change there is dramatic."

Dr. Kohn and other scholars worry that with fewer families having sons or daughters in the military, especially among the affluent, and with a high percentage of enlistees coming from military families, a potential cultural and political gap could open up between civilian and martial societies.

"One of my concerns is effective civilian control of the military," he said. "The decline in the number of members of Congress who are veterans is dramatic. Up until 1995 Congress had a larger percentage of veterans than there was in the general population. After 1995 it was less — and that's after the Republican takeover. That means there is potentially a less knowledgeable, less effective oversight from

Congress."

Even among academics, to be sure, those concerns are narrowly felt. "When the troops come back, many of them will get out; they'll have some memories," said John Allen Williams, a retired Navy captain who is a political science professor at Loyola University Chicago. "A military that self-identified as different from, and possibly superior to, the civilian society it served, with a distinct set of values, and that might be willing to act on them opposed to civilian leaders? The thought that we could have that in this country is just inconceivable."

Both Mr. Burk and Mr. Williams say they support the idea of a draft, though they suggest it could never be enacted in today's political environment.

Ask a squad of today's volunteer soldiers whether they like the idea of a draft, and you'll get a platoon's worth of answers.

Pfc. Michael Philbert, 18, had just finished basic training on Thursday and was browsing at Ranger Joe's, a uniform and equipment store outside Fort Benning, with his father and 13-year-old brother. He said a draft was a bad idea.

"It sounds kind of fair," Private Philbert said. "It's not fair that some poor kids don't have much of a choice but to join if they want to be productive because they didn't go to a good school, or they had family problems that kept them from doing well, so they join up and they're the ones that die for our country while the rich kids can avoid it."

"From the other side, it's not someone's fault that they're born rich or poor. Just because someone is rich doesn't mean you have to yank them out of the comfort of their life just to get even. And most poor people are glad they had this kind of opportunity. They're glad they got in."

But Sgt. Barry Perkins, the military policeman at Fort Benning, who has been around the block a few more times than a buck private, said America's military — and its youth — would benefit from a draft that included both men and women. "If you look at today's society, teenagers are staying at home, not doing a thing," he said. "They need a productive life. It should be straight across the board. As long as you don't allow power, money and wealth to influence it, it will be straight across the board — it will be fairer."

Specialist Markita Scott, the reservist from Columbus, Ga., said she thought a draft was unnecessary. "Already with callbacks you can see the morale is down lower," she said. "They're like, 'I had a job.' Just think if you had a whole draft of people who didn't want to be there. I think of that guy who threw the grenade — you wonder if there would be a lot more like that."