

# BLACK YOUTH LOSING INTEREST IN MILITARY SERVICE

By Edwin Dorn

**B**lack enlistments in the military have declined to their lowest level in more than three decades. The downturn is a major problem for the Pentagon, which is trying to increase the size of the Army and Marine Corps. Absent a recession, which would reduce civilian employment opportunities for enlistment-age youth, the only way to enlarge the all-volunteer force (AVF) is to increase the rewards of service – that is, to raise pay, benefits and bonuses. Such a course would increase the Pentagon’s budget, which has nearly tripled during the past seven years to more than \$600 billion annually.

An urgent problem confronting the next president, therefore, is whether the current level of U.S. military operations is sustainable. Can the country afford the budgetary strain, and can the AVF provide sufficient numbers of qualified, motivated personnel?

## ENLISTMENT TRENDS

From the late 1970s to 2000, blacks comprised, on average, 18 percent of all military accessions and around 25 percent of Army accessions. Since 2001, however, black accessions have declined dramatically. In 2007, blacks made up 14 percent of all accessions and only 12 percent of the Army’s new enlistees.

Relatively high black accessions, combined with high black reenlistment rates, caused blacks to be overrepresented in the military. For much of the time since the AVF was established in 1973, blacks have made up about 20 percent of the total military and 30 percent of the Army. Blacks are about 12 percent of the total population and about 14 percent of the enlistment-age cohort – people 18 to 25 years old.

However, blacks have not been

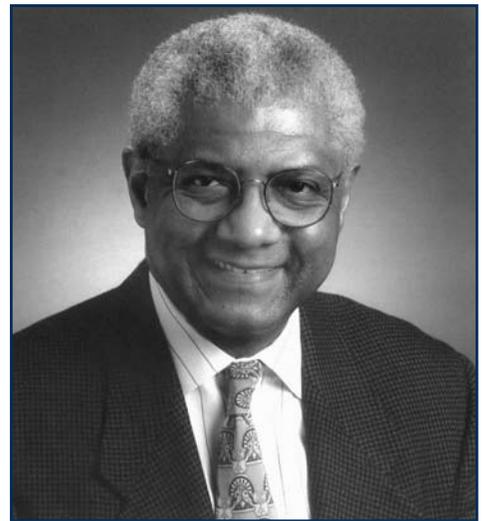
overrepresented among combat fatalities in recent military conflicts. This is because black personnel tend to be less heavily represented in combat units (infantry, artillery and armor) than in support units. Between the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003 and Dec. 8, 2007, 3,877 US military personnel had been killed in Iraq. Of those, 368, or less than 10 percent, were black.

## EXPLANATIONS

Why the decline in black enlistments? Generally speaking, enlistments are driven by two factors: the state of the economy and public attitudes toward the armed services. The reason blacks have been heavily represented in the AVF is that the civilian economy has not been providing sufficient opportunities. In recent decades, the unemployment rate for blacks ages 18 to 25, which is the enlistment-age cohort, has been roughly double the rate for young whites.

If employment prospects for black youth were to improve, black enlistments would decline. But the employment situation has not improved in recent years: black youth unemployment has been above 12 percent since 2001, higher than during the late 1990s.

Therefore, the reason for the decline in black enlistment is not an improvement in civilian opportunities, but a decline in black interest in military service. We know this from survey data. Twice a year, the Defense Department surveys high school students to measure their propensity to enlist. These youth attitude surveys, now called Joint Advertising and Market Research Studies (JAMRS) have been administered since 1975. One key survey question is, “How likely is it that you will be serving in the military in the next few years?” In the spring of 2001, 16 percent of



black respondents said that they either “definitely” or “probably” would enlist. Six years later, in the spring of 2007, only 9 percent of blacks indicated a propensity to enlist – a decline of more than 40 percent.

During the same period, the enlistment propensity for whites declined slightly, from 10 percent to 8 percent. The trend for Hispanics showed great variation during this period: propensity increased from 14 percent in the spring of 2001 to more than 25 percent from late 2001 through the end of 2005, and then declined sharply, to 11 percent in June 2007. Thus, whites, blacks and Hispanics now are roughly equal in their enlistment propensity (8, 9 and 11 percent, respectively) and all three groups are less interested in military service today than six years ago. Black enlistment propensity is lower than at any time in the past three decades.

Enlistment propensity is not a perfect predictor of the future behavior of individual respondents; many who say that they plan to enlist do not; and some who deny interest in the military actually wind up joining. Nevertheless, the general trends give DOD a good sense of how hard it will be for the services to achieve their accession goals. The services adjust their recruiting efforts accordingly— for example, by putting more recruiters into the field and offering enlistment bonuses as propensity declines.

The Iraq war, or more generally, American military activity associated with the “war on terror”, is the major

source of declining propensity. We know this from the same JAMRS surveys cited earlier. In November 2001, 49 percent of all survey respondents said that the terrorist attack of 9/11 made them more likely to enlist in the military, while 38 percent said that the terrorist attack made them less likely to enlist. By June 2007, only 17 percent of respondents said that the war on terror made them more likely to enlist, while 69 percent said that it made them less likely to enlist. This is consistent with trends in another survey question: fewer and fewer high school students support the continuing presence of U.S. troops in Iraq. In June 2007, about 27 percent of youth approved of the way the Bush administration was using U.S. forces, while about 62 percent disapproved (with 10 percent undecided).

Young people's attitudes toward military service are influenced by their parents, grandparents and other adults, and these "influencers" are becoming less and less likely to encourage enlistment. In summer of 2003, the proportions of Hispanic, white and black adults who said they were likely or very likely to recommend military service were 49, 46 and 35 percent, respectively. By early 2007, the numbers had shrunk to 39, 37 and 29 percent.

Findings from other public opinion polls provide one bit of good news for the Pentagon: respect for the military as an institution remains high. For example, a June 2007 Gallup survey found that 69 percent of respondents said that they had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the military, a much higher percentage than expressed confidence in the police, the presidency and Congress. Public confidence in the presidency was in at 25 percent in July 2007, the lowest level since the last days of the Nixon presidency.

The black adults who influence youth may themselves be influenced by a factor that is not at work in the white and Hispanic populations: the awareness that very few blacks have held important, highly visible positions in DOD during the Bush

administration. Currently, only one of the nation's 40 four-star flag officers is black: Army General William Ward, head of the recently established Africa Command. The Bush Pentagon has had no black political appointees at the level of service secretary, under secretary or assistant secretary of defense. While black youth probably do not pay attention to such matters, many black influencers do.

It is possible that factors other than civilian job opportunities and public attitudes are depressing black enlistments. Two possibilities are an increase in black college attendance and a decrease in the numbers of black youth who qualify for military service. A third, more distant possibility, is that the services have reallocated their recruiting efforts to focus less on blacks and more on Hispanics. These warrant further study, but declining enlistment propensity stands out as the most likely explanation.

## POLICY OPTIONS

The next president will inherit a military that has been stretched to the breaking point by the Bush administration's commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan. In order to maintain those commitments, the Pentagon must enlarge the active duty Army and the Marine Corps, the services that have borne the heaviest burden. Current Pentagon plans call for the active duty Army to grow by 75,000 to a total of 547,000; and the Marine Corps is slated to increase by 27,000, to 202,000. The military services also must replace tens of billions of dollars worth of equipment that has been worn out or destroyed in combat.

Total costs for the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are approaching a trillion dollars. In February 2007, President Bush submitted a \$623.1 billion FY 2008 budget request for the Defense Department -- a "base" budget of \$481.4 billion, plus \$141.7 billion for the Global War on Terror. Later in 2007, Defense Secretary Robert Gates went back to Congress to ask for more money -- adding nearly \$50 billion to the original \$623 billion request.

The next president is very likely to conclude that those costs are not sustainable. That conclusion will lead to a drawdown of forces from Iraq, which in turn may eliminate the need to increase the size of the Army and Marine Corps. In time, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq will cause American youth and their adult influencers to look more favorably on military service. Enlistment propensity may not return to the levels of the 1980s and 1990s, but if the services do not need to grow, even a slight improvement will present the Pentagon with a more manageable recruitment situation.

## CONCLUSION

Last summer, the Center for Naval Analysis (CNA) published a study about the recent decline in black enlistment in the Marine Corps. One way to reverse the trend, the study suggested, would be for the Corps to undertake an outreach campaign to influencers, helping them appreciate the ways in which military service is beneficial to black youth. Such a campaign probably would point out that the military services have been far ahead of civilian employers in extending equal opportunity to black Americans.

The Pentagon's leaders are justifiably focused on ways to revive interest in military service. But a different question weighs heavily on the minds of black Americans: what kinds of policy initiatives in the areas of education, economic development and civil rights enforcement will enhance opportunities for black youth in the civilian world? The military and the civilian sides of this issue are like the two sides of a scale. The balancing will occur in the Office of the President of the United States. During this election year, the candidates should be pressed to see who is most likely to find the right balance.

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