

**NYTimes.com**  
**Op-Ed Columnist**

# They Won't Go

By **BOB HERBERT**

Published: June 13, 2005

George W. Bush is in no danger of being ranked among the nation's pre-eminent commanders in chief. Not only has he been unable thus far to win the war in Iraq, but on his watch significant sectors of the proud U.S. military have been rapidly deteriorating.

The Army reported on Friday that it had fallen short of its recruitment goals for a fourth consecutive month. The Marines managed to meet their recruitment target for May, but that was their first successful month this year.

Scrambling to fill its ranks, the Army is signing up more high school dropouts and lower-scoring applicants.

With the war in Iraq going badly and allegations of abuse by military personnel widespread, young men and women are increasingly deciding that there's no upside to a career choice in which the most important skills might be ducking bullets and dodging roadside bombs.

The primary reason the U.S. went to an all-volunteer military in 1973 was to ensure that those who did not want to fight wouldn't have to. That option is now being overwhelmingly exercised, discretion being the clear choice over valor. Young people and their parents alike are turning their backs on the military in droves.

The Army is so desperate for even lukewarm bodies that it is reluctant to release even problem soldiers, troops who are seriously out of shape, or pregnant, or abusing alcohol or drugs. And it is lowering standards for admission to the junior officer ranks. For example, minor criminal offenses that previously would have been prohibitive can now be overlooked.

At the same time Army recruiters have been chasing high school kids with such reckless abandon that a backlash is developing among parents who, in many cases, want the recruiters kept out of their children's schools.

"To the extent that we think students are threatened by recruiters, it's our job to intervene," said Amy Hagopian, a co-chair of the Parent-Teacher-Student Association at Garfield High School in Seattle. Ms. Hagopian, who has an 18-year-old son, complained that recruiters too often put the hard sell on impressionable high school youngsters without informing them of the potential dangers of a life in the military.

Recruiters with the gift of gab go into the schools with a glamorous pitch, bags full of goodies for the kids (T-shirts, donuts, key chains) and a litany of promises they often can't keep. The kids don't hear much about their chances of being maimed or killed, or the trauma that often results from killing someone else.

(A soldier's job is to kill. I can still hear the drill sergeants in basic training screaming at us decades ago: "What are you? What are you?" And we'd scream back: "Killers! Killers!" And the sergeants would say, "What is your purpose?" And we would shout: "To kill! To kill!")

The Army, frantically searching for solutions, is offering enlistments as short as 15 months and considering bonuses worth up to \$40,000. But it may be facing a problem too difficult for any amount of money to overcome. Americans are catching on to the hideousness and apparent futility of the war in Iraq. Five marines were killed in a single bomb attack in western Iraq on Thursday. On Friday, a front-page Washington Post headline described the effort to rebuild the Iraqi military as "Mission Improbable."

A Washington Post-ABC News poll last week found that nearly three-quarters of Americans believe the number of casualties in Iraq is unacceptable, and 60 percent believe the war was not worth fighting. There's something frankly embarrassing about a government offering trinkets to children to persuade them to go off and fight - and perhaps die - in a war that their nation should never have started in the first place. It's highly questionable whether most high school kids are equipped to make an informed decision about joining the military, which is exactly why they're targeted. The additional knowledge and maturity gained in the first few years after high school make it easier for a young man or woman to make a wiser, more meaningful choice, pro or con.

The parents of the kids being sought by recruiters to fight this unpopular war are creating a highly vocal and potentially very effective antiwar movement. In effect, they're saying to their own children: hell no, you won't go.

*E-mail: bobherb@nytimes.com*