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Will U.S. Bring Back the Draft?

Defense Web Site Seeks Volunteers

Conscription Abolished in '73

by Tim Harper

WASHINGTON—A call from the U.S. Defense Department for volunteers to sit on local draft boards has sparked debate here about whether a nationwide military draft could ultimately be needed to complete Washington's Iraq mission.

A number of analysts said yesterday that while any public suggestion of a draft would be politically suicidal for U.S. President George W. Bush in an election year, he could find himself with few other options if he is returned for a second term and the fighting in Iraq is still raging.

Bush, touring fire-ravaged regions of California yesterday, again vowed troops will never cut and run in Iraq, even as attacks on Americans escalate.

The draft was abolished here three decades ago as the Vietnam War wound down, and the Defense department notice about draft boards is on an obscure [link on its Web site](#).

But as debate swirls about the capabilities of the beleaguered U.S. military, the Pentagon is calling for volunteers to "Serve Your Community and the Nation." It says the Selective Service System "wants to hear from men and women in the community who might be willing to serve as members of a local



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draft board."

If conscription becomes necessary, it says, 2,000 local and appeal boards would need volunteers. The boards would decide who would go to war and who could defer their service in the event of a national call-up to boost the currently all-volunteer military.

"This is significant," said Ned Lebow, a presidential scholar at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire and former professor of strategy at the National War College in Washington.

"What the department of Defense is doing is creating the infrastructure to make the draft a viable option should the administration wish to go this route."

He said it is the first public call to reconstitute draft boards since the compulsory draft was abolished in 1973.

Pentagon officials did not return calls seeking comment yesterday.

"I don't think a presidential candidate would seriously propose a draft," said Charles Pena, a senior analyst with the Washington-based Cato Institute. "But an incumbent, safely in for a second term — that might be a different story.

"When you crunch the numbers, you understand why you hear talk about a draft. You only have to look at troop levels to realize we don't have the numbers to do the job in Iraq properly."

The U.S. now has 130,000 troops in Iraq and Pentagon officials, from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on down, have maintained they do not want or need more troops there.

But with Turkey being the latest country to decline to send troops and even staunch U.S. allies such as Australia and Spain pulling their nationals out of increasingly dangerous Baghdad, the prospect for international help is dim.

When the U.S. fought the first Persian Gulf War in 1991, it had 10 army divisions ready to deploy at home as reinforcements.

Today, there is a single division remaining in the U.S. that could be deployed to Iraq.

The U.S. reserves are stretched thin, and the Pentagon doesn't want to extend the stay for troops already being asked to serve the longest unbroken war stints since Vietnam.

A return to the draft would take a vote by Congress and a presidential signature and even with a second-term president barred by the constitution from seeking a third term, it is questionable whether a Congress would be willing to take such a politically risky step.

At present, the preferred route publicly being espoused by the Bush White House is known as "Iraqification," a speeded-up transfer of security and political power to local Iraqi authorities.

But following a speech to a forum on nation-building here yesterday, U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz refused to be specific on an exit strategy for U.S. troops.

"I think we're on a good course," he said. "I don't want to sort of predict dates.

"I think we have to measure progress by what's actually the situation on the ground."

That, according to Wolfowitz, means providing a secure environment, providing the daily essentials such as electricity to Iraqis and the creation of a constitution that leads to elections.

"I believe we are winning the peace," Wolfowitz said. "I believe we're also winning the war. But let's understand: the war continues. And that's what makes this a difficult challenge."

Pena said the window for any exit strategy, no matter what the administration calls it, is fast closing before it looks blatantly political and a bid to win the president re-election.

Rumsfeld is a strong supporter of the all-volunteer army. In September he called it "a booming success ... (with) a remarkable sense of mission," and most military analysts agree that a volunteer military is more professional because it is comprised of people who have chosen to serve in uniform.

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