

Blood Money

The Human-Capital Equation of the U.S. Occupation of Iraq

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“Endless development of armed force. Every day we hear of fresh inventions for the more effectual destruction of our fellow-men, fresh expenditure, fresh loans, fresh taxation. Clamorous patriotism, reckless jingoism; the stirring up of international jealousy have become the most lucrative line in politics and journalism. Childhood itself has not been spared; schoolboys are swept into the ranks, to be trained up in hatred... drilled in blind obedience to the government of the moment, whatever the colour of its flag, and when they come to the years of manhood to be laden like pack-horses with cartridges, provisions and the rest of it; to have a rifle thrust into their hands and be taught to charge at the bugle call and slaughter one another right and left like wild beasts, without asking themselves why or for what purpose. Whether they have before them starvelings... or their own brothers roused to revolt by famine-the bugle sounds, the killing must commence.”

Peter Kropotkin – War!

When a state is determined to pursue war, and all forms of indirect symbolic protest actions have failed to sway politicians to halt their imperialist aggression, the only remaining option is direct action by the working class. One option is a general strike by workers that can effect the production and transportation of military capital, that is the materials essential for the war machine. The other is to deprive the military of the labor it needs to fight the war. The slogan from the Vietnam War protests deliberately speaks to this, “What if they had a war, and no one came?” The U.S. military is overwhelmingly recruited from the working class, and convincing our class as a whole to refuse to work for this blood money may be our best chance for both ending the war in Iraq and limiting the imperialist ambitions of the U.S. for future decades.

Military recruitment is a big business. The U.S. federal government spends \$2.4 billion dollars a year to recruit soldiers for what is the most capital intensive army in the world. It costs the U.S. Department of Defense about \$11,600 to recruit a soldier. In addition to the cost of recruitment, training and equipping the average soldier costs an additional \$50,000. The U.S. Army estimates that each increase in the size of the army by 10,000 soldiers increase costs by \$1.2 billion a year.

The U.S. military spending is \$395.2 billion, with an additional cost of the current war of \$74.7 billion. To understand the kind of money we are talking about, the annual budget for the U.S. Department of Defense (not including the current war) is three times the combined military budgets for Russia, China, Iraq (before the U.S. invasion/occupation), Iran, North Korea, Libya, Cuba, Sudan and Syria.

It also represents 48% of the Federal Discretionary Budget. The U.S. federal spending on education is \$61.4 billion – it is ironic that if not for the huge sums the U.S. spends on the military and the prosecution of various wars, the very economic benefits it tempts recruits with could be shared across the entire U.S. populace. We need resources for housing, education and healthcare – not warfare.

The Class Character of Cannon Fodder

*“Politicians hide themselves away.
They only started the war.
Why should they go out to fight?”*

They leave that role to the poor”

Warpigs — Black Sabbath

A 1999 Pentagon study says that the military is recruited from the lower middle class, and that the socioeconomic status of recruits is slightly lower than the general populace. To lure a segment of the working class into the “voluntary army” a number of benefits, that are quite commonplace as social benefits in other countries, are offered to soldiers.

Education, job training, medical treatment, housing subsidies, a steady income — all benefits that the working class has won through class struggle in some other countries are lacking in the U.S. and used as a form of economic conscription. The “poverty draft” targets the most economically precarious sections of U.S. society and among super-exploited communities; mainly youth of color.

Military recruiters prey upon working class people in Black, Latino, Native American, Arab, Asian, and Pacific Islander communities. Quite simply, the armed forces target people of color for recruitment disproportionately, and thus they die in war disproportionately. During Operation Desert Storm over 50% of the front-line troops were people of color, largely Latino. While blacks make up about 12.7% of the same-age civilian population, they constitute about 22% of enlisted personnel. Perhaps most striking is the number of enlisted women who are black: more than 35%, indicating not only that black women enlist at higher rates, but that they serve longer. In the Army, half of all enlisted women are black, outnumbering whites, who account for only 38%.

The U.S. military doesn't restrict recruitment to U.S. citizens. 35,000 non-citizens are active in the armed forces, of which 15,000 are now eligible for expedited naturalization under an executive order from President Bush.

Do You Want to Be a Bullet Sponge for Career Day?

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA) has led to more intense military recruitment in schools. Before the act, one third of all high schools refused recruiters' request for students' names or access to campus. Under the NCLBA, schools can lose federal funding if they refuse to release student information to recruiters. So now most schools turn over student's names, addresses and phone numbers to military recruiters and allow military recruiters unrestricted access to campuses. The NCLBA opened up some 22,000 schools to military recruiters. Through the Deferred Enlistment Program, students can join the military before they have graduated high school. The proportion of new recruits who were high school graduates has dropped to 91% from its peak of 98% in 1992. Only 6.5% of enlistees had some college as opposed to the 46% of civilians of the same age.

The Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) is present in over 2,800 high schools nationally. Further, the limit on the national number of JROTC units in high schools has just been lifted. These programs traditionally target communities of color, especially areas of Latino concentration. Fifty-four percent of JROTC participants nationwide are students of color. The prior JROTC expansion took place in 1992 in the aftermath of the Gulf War and the L.A. uprising. Writes Shelly Reese, for American Demographics Magazine, “The riots underscored the lack of opportunities for teenagers in economically disadvantaged areas. That led General Colin Powell to lobby for expanded JROTC.”

There are now even feeder courses in middle schools to recruit adolescents into high school programs in the future. In some schools, a course in JROTC has become effectively mandatory for freshmen who find it listed in their initial class schedule. JROTC programs even cost their host schools money, about \$50,000 per school; for 1995–1996, Atlanta spent \$1.5 million on JROTC. Considering the size and expense of the program, it also is very effective; with 50% of program graduates joining the military, recruited directly into the lowest ranks.

Military “Adventure Vans” (actually RVs and Semi-Tractor Trailers) now travel across the country attracting youth with video games and educational multi-media shows, reaching 500,000 students every year. The army vans visit 2,000 schools; and the Navy and Airforce vans visit another 500 each.

One new recruitment strategy has been to attract youth through video games. America’s Army video game is a first person shooter developed at a cost of \$7 million. Released on July 4th, 2002, the game was a free downloadable. It’s website got 750,000 hits per/second the first two days it was online. Computer Gaming World magazine packaged 40,000 copies of the game in an issue of their magazine. It is certainly worth the army’s investment since 28% of hits to goarmy.com’s are from websites that host America’s Army

Human Resources for the Greatest of Inhumanities

“The reason to have a military is to be prepared to fight and win wars. That is our basic fundamental mission. The military is not a social welfare agency, it’s not a jobs program.”

Dick Cheney, Vice President of the U.S.A.

The much lauded fringe benefits to military service in terms of job training, education and healthcare, are really just another big swindle.

Only 12% of male veterans, and 6% of female veterans say they have made use of their skills learned in the military for regular jobs. Veterans actually earn less than non-veterans. The average post Vietnam-war era veteran earns between 11% and 19% less than non-veterans from comparable class backgrounds. Over 50,000 unemployed veterans are on the waiting list for the military’s “retraining” program. The Veteran’s Administration estimates that one-third of all homeless people are veterans.

Soldiers must pay \$1,200 into the Montgomery G.I. bill during their first year, while their pay is as low as \$700/month. Bureaucracy tends to delay paying soldiers up to the first three months in college. Only 35% of recruits receive any education benefits from the military, that means about two-thirds don’t. Only 15% of military recruits graduate with a 4 year degree. The American Council has attributed a drop in black college enrollment to military recruitment.

You can wait for months for an appointment with a VA medical center. In some states, veterans who are not disabled cannot use the centers. In 2002, an infestation of mice, maggots, and flies caused the removal of the director and deputy director for the VA medical regional network for Missouri, Kansas, and southern Illinois. Janitors had not touched food storage areas or the cafeteria for over a year. Maggots had nested in the noses of two comatose patients. Bush slashed the VA medical budget by \$275 million in 2002.

Job Security Through Infinite Destruction

One thing often told to U.S. soldiers in Iraq is that they are rebuilding country, however the military is not the Peace Corps. The U.S. military is also responsible for much of the damage to Iraq's infrastructure since during the Persian Gulf War in 1991. The intentional bombing of civilian life and facilities systematically destroyed Iraq's infrastructure leaving it in a de-industrialized condition.

The economic sanctions against Iraq after the Gulf War exacerbated the problems of destroyed infrastructure. The combination of infrastructure destruction and sanctions was quite deliberate. Col. John Warden III, deputy director of strategy, doctrine and plans for the Air Force, agreed that one purpose of destroying Iraq's electrical grid was that "you have imposed a long-term problem on the leadership that it has to deal with sometime. Saddam Hussein cannot restore his own electricity," he said. "He needs help. If there are political objectives that the U.N. coalition has, it can say, 'Saddam, when you agree to do these things, we will allow people to come in and fix your electricity.' It gives us long-term leverage."

The Iraqi government and the U.S. military have financed reconstruction of nearly 40 hospitals. Iraq's Health Ministry's budget for next year is nearly \$1 billion with an additional \$793 million from the U.S. as well as donations from other countries. Iraq's hospitals were once the envy of the Middle East. The rich used to fly their relatives in for everything from heart transplants to plastic surgery, and Iraqi specialists traveled the world lecturing about their research. Targeting the electrical grid and water-treatment facilities in Iraq in 1991 resulted in epidemics of gastroenteritis, cholera, and typhoid, leading to perhaps as many as 100,000 civilian deaths and a doubling of the infant mortality rate. Medical care continued deteriorate under the economic sanctions imposed after 1991, and Hussein banned the importation of medications produced by U.S. companies and their affiliates, even though those were often the best available. Iraq has one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world — one that climbed from 40 out of 1,000 live births in 1989 to 108 per 1,000 live births today. Former US Secretary of State, Madeline Albright, was asked if the death of a half of a million Iraqi children from sanctions was worth the price, Albright replied: "This is a very hard choice, but we think the price is worth it."

The education system in Iraq was once one of the best in the Middle East in the 1980s, but investment declined from \$620 per year per student in 1988/89 to \$47 in the late 1990s. Sanctions hit the economy and schools were left short of basic supplies such as chalk and blackboards, and poverty forced many children out of education. Until last year, very little money had been put into construction or repair work since the 1991 Gulf War, resulting in a shortage of buildings. During and after the latest war, more than 3,000 schools were looted, destroyed or burned in southern and central Iraq — and 60 in Baghdad suffered bomb damage.

Downsizing in the Death Factory

"Is there anywhere where our theory that the organization of labor is determined by the means of production is more brilliantly confirmed than in the human slaughter industry?"

Marx to Engels (1866)

Much of the 1990s was known for a profound restructuring of labor through plant closings, layoffs and downsizing made possible through the increased efficiency of automation as well as speedups, taylorizations and “just-in-time” production made possible through improved communication and distribution networks — a philosophy that has been applied to the U.S. military. The smaller, more flexible, more mobile army championed by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, shows that he has been thinking like the CEO of the military. Many CEOs discovered that a reduction in the amount of labor makes what labor is used, particularly skilled labor, more essential. Further, that a breach in one link in a global just-in-time production chain can bring the whole enterprise to a screeching halt. A leaner and meaner operation, becomes far more vulnerable to disruption by a withdrawal of labor.

Today, roughly 1 in 200 U.S. citizens are on active military duty — the lowest proportion in a century. The army’s ranks have dropped by 40% since the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. A surprising retirement bulge after Desert Storm contributed to the decline. Currently, there are 499,000 active duty Army troops, backed up by 700,000 National Guard and Army reservists. That’s a third less than when the U.S. fought the Gulf War in 1991.

The U.S. has troops in 156 countries; 63 with military bases. According to the Department of Defense, “the United States military is currently deployed to more locations than it has been throughout history”. Over 130,000 Army troops are in Iraq, 9,000 in Afghanistan, 3,000 in Bosnia, 37,000 in South Korea, 56,000 in Germany. More than half of the U.S. troops stationed permanently on foreign soil are in Germany and South Korea. By comparison, during the Persian Gulf war in 1991, The U.S. had more than 500,000 troops deployed in the Gulf while the non-U.S. coalition forces equaled roughly 160,000, or 24%, of all forces.

The U.S. has already begun to shift resources. For instance one unit has been permanently removed from South Korea and is moving it’s 3,600 troops to Iraq. The move will deplete U.S. forces in South Korea by nearly 10%, the first major shift of resources out of the country in decades —indeed this is shifting troops from the border with North Korea one of the dreaded “Axis of Evil” that actually has openly demonstrated that it has nuclear weapons of mass destruction. There is a real limit to exactly how much the U.S. military can rearrange it’s troop deployments.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, “the United States has invested heavily over the past 50 years in base infrastructure for its troops stationed overseas, any major shifting of forces — either between overseas locations or to the United States—would require significant spending to provide that infrastructure somewhere else.”

Increasing numbers of National Guard and Reserves are being called up for one year stings since 9/11. 15,000 were mobilized this spring, in addition to the 43,000 already mobilized. Deployments of the National Guard and Reserves have gone up 3–400%. This year, 40% of US troops in Iraq will be from the National Guard or Reserves.

Outsourcing and Privatizing the Privates

“Mercenaries and auxiliaries are useless and dangerous; and if one holds his state based on these arms, he will stand neither firm nor safe; for they are disunited, ambitious and without discipline, unfaithful, valiant before friends, cowardly before enemies; they have neither the fear of God nor fidelity to men, and destruction is deferred only so long as the attack is; for in peace one is robbed by them, and in war by the enemy. The fact

is, they have no other attraction or reason for keeping the field than a trifle of stipend, which is not sufficient to make them willing to die for you. They are ready enough to be your soldiers whilst you do not make war, but if war comes they take themselves off or run from the foe”

Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

The largest military presence in Iraq after the U.S. is not the contingent from the United Kingdom, rather it is the some 20–30,000 mercenaries employed by various private security firms – the exact number is unknown. Their losses can be high, but are rarely reported because of non-disclosure agreements—but as many as 80 foreign mercenaries were killed in an eight day period in April. Is the pay worth the risk? It certainly depends on who you are. Some foreign mercenaries receive up to \$1,500 a day, while an Iraqi might receive as little as \$150 per month. Former British SAS commandos can expect \$10,000 month, while the 700 Nepalese gurkas hired by ArmorGroup earn one tenth what white soldiers make. A low-ranking U.S. army grunt makes about \$1,000 month in Iraq, about the same as a Nepalese gurka mercenary.

The U.S. has pushed for the interim Iraqi government to grant mercenaries with U.S. citizenship the same immunity to Iraqi law that U.S. military troops have – but the mercenaries aren’t accountable to the U.S. military either. Officially, the “US government assumes no responsibility for the professional ability or integrity of the persons or firms whose names appear on the list” of private security firms. The question of immunity is particularly troublesome since two of the accused torturers at Abu Ghraib prison are U.S. employees of CACI International.

The largest mercenary group is the South African/British company, Erinys. It is charged protection of oil fields and pipelines. Ahmad Chalabi, previously the Department of Defense’s favorite stooge, secured Erinys the \$100 million contract which employs 14,000 Iraqi troops, largely from Chalabi’s militia for the Iraq National Congress.

Around 1,500 South Africans are employed as mercenaries in Iraq. SAS International, an Erinys subcontractor, was revealed to be employing troops who had been part of South Africa’s apartheid-era security forces. This included a member of the Koevoet, a South African unit used in Namibia which paid bounties on blacks during the 1980s independence movement; as well as a former Pretoria police sergeant who was part of the Vlakplaas death squads whose actions included a car bomb assassination of a government official, killing fifteen blacks and firebombing the homes of between 40–60 anti-apartheid activists.

Mercenaries continue to find themselves at flashpoints. Blackwater USA contractors were the victims whose corpses were mutilated and hung off a bridge which triggered the increased repression of U.S. forces on Fallujah. Blackwater also participated in the siege – which was only resolved by turning security in the town over to Iraqi troops lead by former Baath officers. Having received additional training at Blackwater’s 6,000 acre compound in North Carolina, the company has also employed and dispatched 60 former officers of the Pinochet’s Chilean military. Blackwater (as well as Titan Corp) also have employed between 500–1,000 Serbian troops who have experience in Bosnia. Among it’s contracts, the company won a bidless \$21 million dollar contract to provide security for the former boss of the U.S. occupation – Paul Bremer.

Iraqi Civil Defense Corps (ICDC) current 21,000 troops might be the outsourcing solution to the occupational army’s labor problem – if only they would show up reliably to work and not slack off so much when they do show up. During the uprising of al-Sadr and the Mehdi army, there were reports of ICDC troops deserting, leading U.S. troops into ambush, and firing upon

U.S. troops. In April, half of the Iraqi army, paramilitary units and police deserted or left their posts.

“Right now the ICDC are a mess. They have no discipline and no motivation to do anything. All they want to do is show up, get their pay and their three good meals a day, and that’s that. Plenty of guys over here view them as cannon fodder for us, people we put on the very front of the gate as a first line to stop whoever first.”

Anonymous U.S. soldier working with the ICDC

The behavior of the ICDC is not surprising in light of the Iraqi military under Saddam. That army was one of the most disloyal, deserting, fraternizing, mutineering, couping militaries of all time. Forty percent of the Iraqi army failed to show up for muster when the U.S. invasion started, and even more deserted once it started. During the Iraq-Iran war, the Iraqi army had to shell itself to get its own units to fight. Many of the frontline troops surrendered to Iran rather than fight – which accounts for the fact that at the end of the war Iran had 75,000 Iraqi prisoners of war – seven times the number of Iranian POWs. After the first Gulf War, the U.S. released a similar amount of 71,204 Iraqi POWs to Saudi control.

Between 1991–1994, over 13,000 Iraqi troops deserted. Strangely enough, during the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, only 7,000 Iraqi soldiers surrendered – leaving the bulk of the Iraqi army to go underground or desert. Perhaps they had a premonition about what might await them at the Abu Ghraib prison; but more likely it was the mass slaughter of Iraqi troops deserting the front lines during the first Gulf War where some were literally buried alive by bulldozed trenches or massacred along the “highway of death” that encouraged them not to surrender so easily to the U.S. this time.

If the U.S. military followed the lead of the Iraqi military, there wouldn’t have been a war at all. With the retirement bulge after the first gulf war, and the current difficulties with retention... some U.S. soldiers might be taking at least some Iraqi advice – albeit in a less dramatic fashion.

Similar problems plague the Afghan National Army (ANA) under the Karazi government where 3,000 troops have deserted, leaving the ANA with only 7,000 troops to fight a resurgent Taliban. Other Jehadi/Northern Alliance militia, like those Dostum and Hekmaytar have already proved themselves as less than loyal to the Karazi government.

Iraq’s new police force has some 70,000 cops. There is also 21,000 border police, and an additional 92,000 Iraqis guard important infrastructure and government buildings through the facilities protection services. While these positions are some of the most dangerous in Iraq, and while the pay of \$3–500 a month for security services is the equivalent to the salaries of civil servants and teachers – a larger motivating factor might be Iraq’s 45% unemployment rate.

The largest challenge for the future Iraqi army is the incorporation of standing militias. So far, the army has an officer core of 1,700 officers – but it remains to be seen if they can successfully integrate the militias. Some 100,000 troops are being ordered into the army, border security or police – they are being given the enticement of being treated as veterans with various government benefits including pensions .

The bulk of militia fighters are 75,000 Kurdish pesh merga under the control of the two main Kurdish political parties PUK and KDP. The Kurds have been seen as the U.S. strongest allies, but that all might be about to change. At the beginning of May, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) under it’s new name of the People’s Congress of Kurdistan has declared an end to it’s five

year-old cease-fire with the Turkish army — which they backed up with attacks that the Turkish army responded to in kind. Since no Kurd was selected as either president or prime minister in the interim government, Kurdish political parties are feeling frozen out. The KDP and PUK have threatened to pull out of the interim government unless Kurdish autonomy is guaranteed. A new Kurdish uprising could mean mission creep to Turkey, Syria, Iran, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The rest of the militias are controlled by Allawi's Iraqi National Accord, Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress, the Shiite Dawa party, the Iraqi Islamic Party, Iraqi Hezbollah, the Iraqi Communist Party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. The Badr Brigade (of the Supreme Council) numbers 15,000 and so far appears to be cooperating, however many Badr brigadiers were sympathetic to the uprising by al-Sadr and the Mehdi Army, with over 800 fighters killed, still appears to be growing.

The other U.S. allies in Iraq are the 24,000 troops from the armies of other nation-states who are increasingly concerned about their role in Iraq. It was U.S. allies that bared the brunt of Mehdi uprising. Britain has more than 10,000 troops in Iraq, and Italy, Poland and the Ukraine have between 3,000 and 1,000 troops deployed in Iraq respectively. Spain's removal of 1,300 troops is the most significant so far. A request by the U.S. to involve NATO in Iraq has fallen on deaf ears. Will the new U.N. mandate help in securing more peace keepers?

The Rising Cost of Blood in Exchange for Oil

"We don't do body counts."

General Tommy Franks, US Central Command

Even though Bush declared an end to major hostilities over a year ago, death of occupying forces continues. Since the start of the Iraq war there have been 1,117 coalition deaths including 929 U.S. soldiers. For the U.S. forces alone that's more deaths than the first three years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam war. At least 21 U.S. soldiers have committed suicide. According to the Pentagon, 5,013 U.S. troops have been wounded in action. Soldiers are medically evacuated from Iraq for other reasons including "non-combat related weapons discharges", malingering (self-inflicted wounds), pregnancies, psychological breakdowns, and accidents. An unknown number of mercenaries have died, as well as an unknown number of Iraqi military. Civilian Iraqi deaths are estimated between 11,510 and 13,483.

Four divisions — half the Army's active-duty strength — are in the two lowest readiness categories because of their service in Iraq. They are expected to be in that situation for the next six months. US ground force requirements in post-invasion Iraq "have stressed the U.S. Army to the breaking point" With a third of the army's total end strength involved in occupying Iraq, the Army War College calls "for an across-the-board reassessment", that is for an increase in service levels.

Part of the effort to increase service levels has led to the highly resented "stop-loss" policies, which prevent armed forces members from retiring or resigning. At the end of May 2004 some 44,000 soldiers had their service extended. The most recent stop-loss policy restricts soldiers from completing their service if their unit is within three months of deployment to Iraq.

3800 members of the Individual Ready Reserve are being called to active duty. The IRR are soldiers who have completed an active-duty enlistment but still are within eight years of when they

entered the military. Of those already called up, 350 have already filed appeals avoid deployment—though none have yet been granted.

Finding it increasingly difficult to retain current soldiers and recruit future soldiers; as well as finding increasing needs to increase the size of the military; the U.S. government may try to return to one of the more primitive forms of labor expropriation — slavery. While they will wait till after the elections this fall, politicians might find it necessary to reinstitute forced military labor-conscription: The Draft.

“Unless so-called Army short tours in the badlands of Iraq and Afghanistan become manageable based on the number of troops available—right now the Army is trying to do the work of 14 divisions with 10 under-strength, active-duty divisions—we’ll see a mass exodus from the Green Machine and the inevitable return of the draft.”

Col. David H. Hackworth (USA Ret.), Soldiers for Truth

Take This Job and Shove It

“We soldiers who are driven along to the word of command, or by blows, we who receive the bullets for which our officers get crosses and pensions, we, too, poor fools who have hitherto known no better than to shoot our brothers, why, we have only to make a right-about-face towards these plumed and decorated personages who are so good as to command us, to see a ghastly pallor overspread their faces.”

Peter Kropotkin, An Appeal to the Young

We can expect retention to continue to decline as morale continues to decline, which will increase both the amount of stop-loss orders as well as number of soldiers fleeing military service when they have the opportunity. An October (2003) Stars and Stripes survey said that 1/3rd of the military personnel surveyed believed that the war had “no value” or “little or no value” at all.

Further, nearly half of the U.S. troops plan not to re-enlist. The New York Times reports that for the last three years, Army, Navy and Airforce Reserves have failed to meet their recruitment requirements. According to Thomas White, retired general and former Secretary for the Army, “We are in serious danger of breaking the human-capital equation of the Army. Once you break it, it takes along time to put it back together. It took us 20 years after Vietnam”.

“The voting via the shoe leather express isn’t about to start, it HAS started. A few of my best friends and confidants here at Campbell are company grade officers and they can’t wait for their obligation to end. They have no intention of staying in. One of them spent 9 months in Afghanistan and then 7 months in Iraq. He just took company command and he will be going back to Iraq in a few months for another year. 3.5 years in and most of it spent in the Middle East. He has no intention of staying past his mandatory service date.”

Anthony Topkick, Soldiers for Truth

While many soldiers will “vote with their feet” and decline future service at their end of their tours, a few have already started to apply as conscientious objectors, that is they are refusing to

participate in war in any manner. Conscientious objection reached record heights in the Vietnam War era where there were some 200,000 COs. By comparison, the Gulf War had only 111, but military put a stop to the practice and imprisoned 2,500 C.O. applicants. To qualify as a CO, an applicant must have a “firm, fixed and sincere objection to war in any form or the bearing of arms” because of deeply-held moral, ethical, or religious beliefs. The GI Rights Hotline (1-800-394-9544) can provide information to military service members about military discharges, grievance and complaint procedures, and other civil rights. In 2002 the number of calls to the hotline had grown to 21,000 calls — it now averages 3,000 calls a month.

For some, they won’t be willing to wait out the terms of the service (or stop loss), nor will they qualify as conscientious objectors. Their choice becomes imprisonment or desertion. After being Absent With Out Leave (AWOL) for 30 days soldiers are classified as deserters. In the Vietnam war some 100,000 people went into exile to avoid military service, mostly to Canada — and the New York Times estimates that 25,000 Vietnam resisters never returned to the U.S.

According to the U.S. Army public affairs office. Over 3,800 soldiers deserted in 2002, of these 3,255 were returned to military control — then usually discharged or serving a short incarceration sentence. There are currently several high profile desertion cases like Jeremy Hinzman and Brandon Hughes who’ve requested refugee status and political asylum in Canada — though these requests are likely to be denied, and if denied it is likely means deportation back to the U.S. It is also much more difficult to legally immigrate to Canada today than it was during the Vietnam War. Further, by going into exile, the U.S. government will consider the expatriate deserter to be a fugitive. Any return to the U.S. is likely to result in conviction for desertion.

Breaking the Human-Capital Equation

“In response to the ongoing atrocities being committed against the Iraqi people by the US military, an Air Force recruitment center in Woodbridge, Nj became the target of direct action. The Main Street office had red paint thrown all over its front, including its front windows and sign. This serves the primary purpose of causing damage but also symbolically protests the slaughter at the hands of America’s criminal air force. The blood is on every Americans’ hands... this invasion is an effort by the US government to expand corporate hegemony over the region. Human rights are being pushed aside to plunder Iraqi resources and leave a stronger military stronghold in the region. America’s oil-based consumer economy is destroying civilizations all over the world for the profits of a minority.”

Communique from Direct Action Front, April 16 2003

With all these statistics, it’s tempting to reduce human beings to mere numbers. For the likes of General White, the labor of soldiers is commodified to such an extent, that the soldiers themselves become indistinguishable from war-material — human beings are reduced to just another form of capital. Labor can become so alienated, our humanity, ethics and conscience is on the auction block. There is a tendency for people to simply go along with the situation, to buckle under to the pressure, to accept authority. It feels like a betrayal to go against the esprit de corps, to breach the job contract, to break the law. As much as the state and capitalism attempt to reduce human beings to automatons through the alienation of our labor, one thing I’ve realized by talking to

soldiers, is that some humanity still exists under the mass-produced uniforms. Some part of them wants to defy authority and reclaim their lives. While politicians, corporations and military brass might think of grunts as nothing more than interchangeable pieces in the war machine, we should not make the same mistake. They are still human beings, we can still talk to them, and by doing so... we might be able to help them free themselves from war.

We can reach out to youth who are feeling pressured to join the military and show them that there are other paths they could take, that some jobs just aren't worth having. Since the military starts recruiting in schools, we must be active there as well. There is an exception in the No Child Left Behind Act that allows students and parents the ability to opt out of their information being provided to military recruiters, they must simply send a letter to their school superintendent. Presenting students and parents with a form letter they can use is an excellent way to start conversations in opposition to war and militarism.

Also, some anti-recruitment activists have gotten access to schools by calling for equal access as the military recruiters have, and they provide presentations on other options for training and education while exposing the swindle that is the military recruitment. We can work with student activists groups to kick JROTC out of their curriculum, and counter the military adventure vans. Forums at schools should be planned where people can speak out against joining the military, and veterans can relate both the banalities of the military as a career and the horrors of war. Targeting recruitment centers for pickets and protests will help prepare the anti-war movement for opposition to the draft.

Further, in reaching out to youth, we have to build an anti-militarist culture. To a certain extent, the U.S. move away from conscription after the Vietnam war represented how much anti-militarism had already taken hold in the U.S., and the pre-emptive protests before war that have happened since the 1990s are another example of how deeply anti-militarism has become entrenched. The counter-culture of the hippies has been stereotyped as anti-militarist, but anti-militarism can be found in many youth scenes, and that sentiment should be encouraged; much like anti-racist activists have encouraged anti-racism in youth culture through combinations of music, fashion, graffiti, periodicals, forums and rallies.

Getting to potential recruits before they enlist is the best way to deprive the military of new blood. We should setup pickets outside recruitment centers, just like we might picket a struck business or a temporary employment agency that primarily is used to break strikes through hiring scabs. Joining the military must be seen as even worse than scabbing. We must impress upon our fellow workers that the military is the worst job imaginable, that whatever they are offering it's not worth killing and dying.

Finally, and potentially the most difficult thing to do is to convince those already in the military to get out. It is likely that many soldiers will come to be selectively opposed to the current war, instead of becoming total conscientious objectors.

The U.S. military, however, doesn't allow for selective objection — so for those willing to get out, they'll either need to claim conscientious objection, or go AWOL and then desert. We need to provide soldiers with all the information we can get them to accept. Even if you can convince a soldier to go AWOL for just a short period of time, to decide if fighting this war is what they really want to do, you are providing a window where they, at least, have the option to think for themselves. Once they are deployed to the Middle East — even if they change their minds once there — they are in a difficult situation; you can't walk home from Iraq.

The protests that attempted to “stop the war before it starts” were unprecedented — and yet, they failed to stop the war. What’s needed now is a qualitative, not quantitative, shift in our anti-war activity. Instead of speaking to politicians, we need to start speaking to more receptive ears — that is the rest of the working class with a message that speaks to our economic situations and human needs. There is no war, but the class war.

By breaking the human-capital equation of the military and depriving the capitalist state of the labor it needs to keep the war-machine going, we can limit the U.S. ability to wage wars of occupation. If we are successful in such a campaign, we can deter U.S. imperialist aggression not just today, but perhaps for an entire generation. The U.S. may have reached it’s pinnacle as an empire. The war in Iraq may represent the empire overstretching itself. If we can break the will of soldiers to fight for the U.S. empire, this might be the last such war the empire will ever have. The struggle against imperialist war is worth fighting.

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