

## **Bent but Not Broken**

### The Military Challenge for the Next Commander-in-Chief

P. W. Singer

#### **Summary**

Although the next U.S. President will become Commander-in-Chief of a military unmatched in its power and capability, this excellence is under siege. The U.S. military has been stretched thin and worn down by the combination of extensive deployments over the last six years and a deferral of the hard questions of how a nation supports a military at war. Downward trends in recruiting and retention show a force under great stress. More than a simple matter of raw numbers, this has a long-term effect on the quality of our military forces. And, while defense budgeting remains focused on acquiring major new weapons systems that will not be available until many years hence, a looming equipment gap harms our security in the here and now. The war in Iraq has created many of these challenges, but they will continue years after operations there end.

A critical test for the next Commander-in-Chief will go beyond deciding when and where to use military force; it will require taking the actions necessary to ensure that the U.S. military does not become broken under the new President's watch and that it remains both ready and capable. In the very early days of the new Administration, the next President should commission plans of action for adequately filling the military's personnel and equipment needs. Specifically, the new President should:

- formulate a national call to service that would support recruitment efforts
- ensure that recruiting standards are not lowered
- restore funding of troop levels now deemed "temporary"



- expand the force only in a manner that addresses severe gaps and needs
- create a Joint Stabilization Command to better plan and support operations
- answer troops' quality-of-life concerns and establish a Military Families Advisory Board to better support retention
- end the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy that puts social politics above national security
- make sure our troops have the supplies and equipment they need
- reevaluate weapons acquisitions to meet the realities of the post-9/11 world
- end abuse of the supplemental budget appropriations mechanism
- eliminate and punish waste and corruption that undermine security and
- reform the acquisition process to work the market rather than be worked by it

## Context

A spent and broken force after Vietnam, the U.S. military has been rebuilt into the most professional, best-trained, and best-equipped military in history. For all the challenges presented in Afghanistan and Iraq, its combat capabilities are unmatched. Indeed, the greatest threats we face no longer come from peer competitors, but from foes that seek out weakness on other planes of battle.

This excellence is under siege. Our military has been at war for the last six years, but—other than at our airports—our nation has not. There has been no call to service and no mobilization on a national scale. Instead, our leaders have deferred the tough challenges, which are beginning to create serious crunches on both military personnel and equipment that no serious candidate for President can ignore.

The U.S. military's ability to field sufficient, high-quality, well-equipped forces is at a "tipping point." It is certainly far from broken, but warning symptoms are clearly mounting. Small compromises—such as accepting gaps in personnel and equipment—are beginning to have huge consequences. "What keeps me awake at night," General Richard Cody, Army Vice Chief of Staff, told Congress, "is, what will this all-volunteer

force look like in 2007?" What it will look like in 2008 and beyond should be keeping the candidates for President awake as well. Ensuring that the U.S. military does not break down will be a critical—and unavoidable—challenge.

## **All That We Can Be? Ensuring the Quality of Our Armed Forces**

With its rigorous requirements, training programs, and extensive education system, the U.S. military is arguably the smartest, most educated military force in history. The days of out-producing and outnumbering the enemy are gone. Today, quality comes before quantity when trying to maintain American dominance on the battlefield. With the United States' having global responsibilities, but just 4 percent of the world's population, there may be no other choice.

Current pressures on the military derive from an Iraq campaign that has turned out to be much longer and more arduous than planned. In no service are these pressures more pronounced than in the Army. In fact, the Defense Science Board has concluded that the United States simply does not have enough ground troops to meet the commitments of ongoing missions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond. Even before President Bush's planned "surge," stresses and strains from the increasing pace and frequency of deployments were stretching forces thin, gradually wearing down units and individual soldiers.

*Already, the Army is falling short of its goals to recruit sufficient numbers of the "best and brightest" needed to maintain a high-quality professional force.* In 2005, the Army missed its recruiting target by eight percent, and the Army (and Navy) Reserves also missed their targets. This was the largest miss in over 20 years, but even more noteworthy, it occurred despite the addition of 1,300 recruiters and a \$726 million increase in the recruitment budget. Spending on selective re-enlistment—mostly bonuses—was five times the amount in 2003. Recruitment problems also affect the military's ability to retain its leaders of tomorrow. In 2005, for example, the Army experienced the lowest retention of West Point graduates in 16 years.

*The Marines Corps met its goals, but only by pulling a higher number from its "Start Pool."* This pool contains individuals who have enlisted but delayed their start of training—for example, high school students who enlist but want to start training after graduation. For each person taken from this pool, a recruiter has to find an applicant willing to both enlist and ship to training camp in the same month. This lessens the time an applicant has to prepare for the rigors of training and creates bigger recruiting problems down the line. The Marines are worried that their percentage of "pooled" recruits—normally about 50 percent—is down to 41 percent; it is even more worrisome, then, that the Army Start Pool is only 12 percent filled.

*By 2006, the goals were just being met, but only by moving the goalposts.* The Army began to alter the recruitment standards that have been at the heart of fielding the best force possible. It reduced the minimum enlistment time commitment from two years to 15 months (just when recruits begin to master a skill, they could be on their way out), raised the maximum age from 35 to 40 in January 2006, and a mere six months later, raised it again to 42, mainly because recruitment numbers were still tight. In addition, to keep force levels up, approximately 8,000 enlisted soldiers have been "involuntarily retained" under the Stop-Loss program that keeps soldiers with key specialties beyond the length of their enlistment.

*Perhaps the most important adjustment was the lowering of recruit quality standards.* The U.S. military requires that all recruits take the Armed Forces Qualification Test, which assesses how well the person will perform once in uniform. Recruits' test scores put them within four broad bands or "categories." Through the 1980s and 1990s, the military recruited only 2 percent of those who scored in the lowest 30 percent, known as Category 4, usually picking out just those few needing special consideration. In 2005, the Category 4 allowance was doubled. In 2006, it was raised again to 12 percent—six times the acceptable percentage just three years earlier. In addition, the military accepted double the number of recruits who were not high school graduates.

Ensuring the best possible human capital for the force is essential in the era of the "strategic corporal," a term coined by former Marine Corps Commandant Charles

Krulak. In the conflicts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the pressures on individual soldiers are greater, and expectations and responsibilities are higher. Concomitantly, mistakes at the lowest unit level can have strategic consequences.

*The training program itself may be trending less difficult due to recruiting pressures.* The proportion of recruits who washed out of training dropped from 18.1 percent in 2005 to only 7.6 percent in 2006, despite the higher number of candidates the Army had judged to be less qualified.

*In addition, the immense pressure to meet quotas has led some recruiters to cut corners.* The Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports that claims of recruiter misbehavior and violations of established policy are growing at a disturbing rate: "Some recruiters, reportedly, have resorted to overly aggressive tactics, which can adversely affect [the Defense Department's] ability to recruit and erode public confidence in the recruiting process." Forty-four Army recruiters were subsequently relieved of duty, and 369 admonished.

*The challenges of maintaining a high-quality force are even more dire in specific sectors and specialties.* At the tip of the spear in the war on terrorism are special operations forces, currently in their largest deployment ever. Many special forces units already are under-strength, have been repeatedly deployed, and are slowly wearing out. The Pentagon has planned to increase active duty Army Special Forces battalions by one-third, as well as increase Psychological Operations and Civil Affairs, establish a Marine Corps Special Operations Command, and increase the number of SEAL teams. Such plans will take years to implement and potentially water down quality. Even then, Special Operations Command reportedly believes that it will be stretched too thin to meet the requests of the regional combat commands.

The military includes an array of specialties that are now so understaffed that its officers refer to them as "high demand/low density." The Army has a 40 percent shortfall in highly valued information operations soldiers and does not expect to fill the gap within seven years. Other understaffed specialties like civil affairs personnel or

engineers, while not involved in direct combat, are sometimes more greatly valued in the field. General John Abizaid has said of a 17-member unit of Navy engineers in East Africa: “[They] achieve as much for us as a battalion of infantry on the ground looking for bad guys.”

*Frequently, resource problems and skill gaps force the military to outsource functions to private contractors.* In Iraq, CENTCOM has outsourced some 100,000 jobs that once would have been done by soldiers, including in areas such as combat functions and prisoner interrogation that are inappropriate. Serious problems allegedly arising from this practice range from prisoner abuses at Abu Ghraib to war profiteering.

*The National Guard and Reserve are experiencing the same challenges in maintaining their numbers.* The National Guard currently has 10 brigades deployed in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Balkans, and another 50,000 troops were deployed after Hurricane Katrina—numbers not seen since World War II. As part of meeting the needs of the second wave of the “surge,” the Pentagon has announced plans to increase the amount of time reservists can be mobilized, allowing them to be called back even if they have already reached their previously agreed-upon limits. Many Reservists and National Guard members will see this as a broken promise, damaging morale and making future recruitment more difficult.

*Overstretched forces, unit overuse, and frequent redeployments also pressure the home front.* Soldiers often cite family strain as a key factor in deciding whether to re-enlist. Unfortunately, data confirm the negative impact on families: divorce rates for Marines and Army soldiers have doubled since 2001.

*Finally, the professional forces are gradually less representative of the U.S. population.* Recruiting disproportionately targets certain sectors and geographic regions. For example, recruitment numbers for economically disadvantaged and legacy youths (children of soldiers) are higher than for the general populace. ROTC programs are predominantly in the South. And, the absence of the American elite from the services is striking; less than one percent of Ivy League graduates enlist, as compared with

about 50 percent in the 1950s. This is not to challenge the qualities of youths who do enlist, but rather to note that these patterns distance the public as a whole from its military. Further, with greater numbers of our nation's leaders unfamiliar with the military, they are more prone to make poorly informed decisions about the military and armed conflict.

Strikingly, this trend worsens despite the absence of the tensions that characterized the Vietnam era. Seventy percent of college students, the most liberal segment of the American public, trust the military above all other public institutions. As one report noted of the new "9-11 Generation," "The traditional dove-hawk, liberal-conservative dichotomies describe little about today's youth...They are simultaneously human rights crusaders and supporters of a strong military." Opportunity is being missed.

### **Set an Agenda for Action on Personnel**

Overstretched personnel and threats to force quality will not go away by themselves. The number of ground forces proposed in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review support only 18 brigades for deployment. Under current transformation plans, these units also would have about 3,500 fewer personnel per unit. But, at the height of U.S. deployments, operations in Iraq and Afghanistan alone involved 20 brigades, now universally agreed as far too few. After congressional pressures grew, the Bush Administration permitted the Army to maintain 30,000 extra troops, a measure that did not ease shortfalls.

Any serious candidate for President in 2008 will have to address recruiting problems and force quality. Needed are both short- and long-term policy responses designed to alleviate pressure on troop numbers, while keeping troop quality high. Following are seven such steps.

***The next President should issue a national Call to Service.*** It is striking that a nation of 300 million cannot persuade 300,000 talented young individuals to serve their country. The next President should make it clear that it is not merely the U.S.

military, but the United States of America that is at war, and the nation needs to share the burden. The next President should seek to energize today's youth the same way Presidents Kennedy and Reagan did in the past. This call to action would place the ethic of public service and sacrifice on the agenda again, as goals to aspire to, and would enlist the help of America's youth—as well as the parents, coaches, and teachers who influence them— in meeting our national challenges.

***Demand that Quality Comes First.*** A force can quickly lose its edge; but as the experiences after Vietnam illustrate, restoring it can take decades. The next President must ensure that the first priority of the Secretary of Defense is to prevent the breakdown of the U.S. military. Within 100 days, the new Secretary should give the President a plan of action to address the personnel and recruiting issues, including measurable benchmarks of progress. A realistic plan may require balancing new weapons acquisitions against current troop quality and personnel requirements. For example, the entire recruiting budget could be increased approximately 50 percent just by purchasing one less F-22 jet fighter. Between the security tradeoff of 182 rather than 183 new jets and an increase in overall force quality, the next Secretary should choose the latter.

***Restore Funding for Needed Troop Levels.*** Given the current and likely future pressures on the force, now is not the time for troop reductions. The next President's budgets should make permanent the temporary increases of 30,000 Army troops and 5,000 Marines.

***High Supply Must Equal High Demand.*** Some analysts have proposed expanding the forces even more, with numbers ranging from 35,000 (in the President's 2007 State of the Union speech) to 100,000 or 200,000. However, throwing numbers broadly at the problem is not the answer. Rather, the military's needs are greatest in certain units and specialties that currently are over-extended, whereas some other specialties are not called for by commanders in the field. Within the first 100 days, the President must require an evaluation of personnel demands relative to supply, using this as the basis for further expansion, not just an overall increase in numbers. The



Pentagon also should be required to move private contractors out of any roles that are inappropriate for civilians. Over-outsourcing is not the answer for the military's future.

The expansion of high demand/low density specialties also aligns with the new interests and capabilities of the 9/11 generation, including college students who may not have been prone to volunteer for the military's traditional roles. A new recruiting effort should tap into these sectors through, for example, outreach to liberal arts and engineering programs.

***Create a Joint Stabilization Command.*** Gaps within specialties particularly relevant to stabilization missions began to appear in the early 1990s and remain unfilled today. In addition, the planning side of the stabilization mission was grossly ignored in Iraq, leading to actions (and inactions) that fueled the insurgency and continue to plague our troops. The creation of a Joint Stabilization Command would ensure that such lessons are not forgotten and that specialized forces are available for this task. The command also would provide much-needed coordination with the interagency process.

***Create a Military Families Advisory Board.*** The next President should establish a board to support soldiers' families, of whom we are asking so much. Consisting of experts and family representatives from each service, it would develop actionable policy initiatives to ease the burden on spouses and families. The board would provide an institutionalized conduit, which currently does not exist, to bring military families' changing concerns to the attention of senior policymakers and the public. To hold feet to the fire, the board's yearly report to the President and Secretary of Defense should be made public and include status reports on the previous year's recommendations.

***Don't Ask, Don't Tell?—Don't Bother.*** Homosexuals in military service were a controversial issue at a time of relative peace in the early 1990s. The United States is now at war. The policy of discharging suspected gay soldiers has cost the U.S. military \$320 million and more than 10,000 skilled soldiers in the past 10 years. Eight hundred of these were in high-demand/low-density skill areas, such as Arabic linguists and combat engineers. Don't Ask, Don't Tell has undermined overall recruitment efforts to

get top-quality soldiers, including by limiting access to universities and job fairs in the past. Moreover, social and military attitudes have evolved. Seventy-nine percent of Americans now support a policy that allows gays to openly serve in the military, while West Point's "best thesis" award last year went to an officer who argued the policy should be scrapped for violating military values. Given that no credible study has found that reversing the policy would harm America's combat capabilities, it is time to put national security above social politics.

### **When the Wheels Really Fall Off: Facing the Equipment Gap**

One of the less discussed aspects of the Iraq war and other recent deployments is the more than 1,000 vehicles, including costly tanks and helicopters, that have been lost. In many cases, the equipment is not destroyed in combat but is just wearing out, because of heavier-than-expected use in tough conditions. As examples, the U.S. Army Association estimates that equipment is being used at rates five to six times higher than in peacetime; Humvees used in Iraq have needed to be replaced after two instead of the expected 13 years; and light armored vehicles have been replaced after six instead of the expected 30 years.

*Equipment as old as the soldiers that use it also adds to the challenge.* The military's medium trucks are, on average, 21 years old; its M-1 tanks are 20 years old; and its F-15/F-16 fleet is 17 years old. A GAO study of 30 different military equipment items found that readiness had declined across all military branches, due mainly to heavy use in Iraq and Afghanistan and difficulties with complex and aging equipment. Equipment wear and tear affects not only readiness, but also capacity.

*To equip forces in Iraq, we are robbing Peter to pay Paul.* To meet needs in the field, equipment is pulled from stateside units, which affects training down the line, or from pre-positioned stocks. To meet needs in Iraq, the Marines have drawn down some 70 percent of pre-positioned stocks in the Pacific and Europe.

*The National Guard and Reserves also are being tapped to fill equipment shortfalls and are experiencing the same equipment crunch.* The Army National Guard has transferred more than 100,000 items to active units overseas, depleting key inventory items, including radios, generators, and armored Humvees. The Army Reserve likewise has transferred more than 235,000 items, worth \$765 million. By mid-2005, the Army Reserve had only 76 percent of its essential equipment, while non-deployed National Guard units had only 34 percent.

*These equipment shortfalls undermine our ability to fight and win today's wars, reduce our ability to head off the potential wars of tomorrow, and limit the policy options of leaders as they wrestle with issues ranging from North Korea to Darfur.* According to a September 14, 2006, *Armed Forces Journal* article, the Army Chief of Staff has noted that two-thirds of Army brigade combat teams are "not ready for combat." The annual risk assessment by the Joint Chiefs of Staff has found that U.S. commanders around the world didn't think they could meet established equipment standards. We can be sure that adversaries look at this trend as a positive development. Gaps in equipment also limit the ability to answer emergency missions at home, including terrorism or natural disaster response.

*Equipment shortages would remain a challenge even if the Iraq war ended tomorrow.* The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that the military had a \$13 to \$18 billion backlog of equipment needing repair and replacement. Lt. General Steven Blum, chief of the National Guard Bureau, estimates that it will cost about \$21 billion over next five years to catch up on the National Guard equipment shortfall.

*Current equipment needs have been neglected in favor of long-term weapons system development, funded in part by supplemental budget authorizations.* Rather than filling current equipment needs, each of the services is focused on centerpiece weapons programs for the future, specifically the Army's Future Combat System, the Air Force's F-22, Navy's DD-X, and Marines' V-22. Budget supplementals are the appropriate funding mechanism to address equipment repair backlogs and emergency needs. Yet, the services have often used the supplementals (estimated at \$130 billion

or more for FY08 down from \$170 billion for rFY07) to finance what they can't get in the regular budget, such as long-term transformation projects like the Army's modularity program or the Joint Network Node. At the same time, though, Army repair depots have been operating at only half their capacity due to a lack of funding. Whenever Congress has balked at the long-term add-ins, the Army has threatened to stop buying spare parts, "freeze" all new contracts, and "release service contract employees, [including] recruiters." Former Army officer and conservative columnist Ralph Peters is perhaps the most pointed critic on this issue: "Faced with the urgent need to replenish Marine and Army equipment destroyed or worn out in Iraq, we're buying high-tech toys that have no missions. . . . Your tax dollars are being squandered while our troops are being betrayed."

*The problem is worsened by a poorly managed Pentagon acquisitions process. Cost overruns happen in any business, but in defense contracting they have become the norm. For example, the GAO found that, of the Pentagon's 26 biggest acquisition programs, 40 percent are above expected costs, and 20 percent are behind schedule. The top five weapons programs have increased in cost by an average of 29 percent, or \$122.4 billion. The F-22 fighter jet, for example, originally projected to cost \$145 million per plane, is now at roughly \$345 million per plane. Despite their failure to control the cost structure and meet the schedule of the program, contractors pocketed 91 percent of the performance bonus, about \$850 million.*

*There is also a worrisome trend toward old-fashioned corruption and profiteering. Deputy Attorney General Paul McNulty estimated that 5 percent of all federal spending, especially from the less monitored supplemental funds, is lost to fraud, mostly in defense contracting and Iraq reconstruction efforts. In addition, the FY06 Defense Appropriations Act allocated \$14.9 billion in "pork" money contained in 2,971 earmarks. For any business, such results would be stunning. For a nation at war, they are shameful.*

What is worse, the need to address the shortfalls will likely come at the worst possible time, when the country faces a looming budget deficit. The defense budget is already

at its post-World War II high, equaling the Reagan era build-up. The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments has stated that the Bush Administration may be underestimating the accumulated costs of its planned budgets versus available funds by as much \$900 billion or more. A past director of the non-partisan CBO said he was “terrified” of the budget deficit and described it as a looming “fiscal hurricane.”

## **Establish an Agenda for Action on Equipment**

Many of these issues are not easy to solve and will require difficult tradeoffs. The future President should be guided by three priorities that will resolve the looming equipment crunch, rather than continuing to pass it down the line.

*Place current needs first.* As a nation at war, we must ensure that our troops have the best possible support and equipment. The President should direct that each major defense program initiated before 9/11 be reevaluated in light of current needs and gaps and likely future threat scenarios. While many of the programs have merit, the number of weapons platforms actually ordered must be weighed against other pressing needs. (An online appendix to this paper at the Opportunity '08 website looks at this issue in greater detail for each service.)

*End the supplemental budget appropriation gravy train.* Supplemental appropriations were intended as emergency funding for operations that weren't contemplated in the regular budget. As a first step to restoring fiscal sanity to military purchases, the new President must make it clear that the supplemental budgets are neither a catch-all nor a place to hide items whose congressional approval is doubtful. The next President should follow Congress's bipartisan recommendation that future defense budgets include funds for predictable wartime spending. Any request for supplemental funding for military activities in Iraq and beyond should be confined to operational costs and meeting equipment shortfalls. It should not include programs that are long-term or transformative. These programs should be evaluated on their merits and included in the regular budget process.

*Cut waste and corruption.* The next President owes it to the troops and taxpayers to make it a priority to reduce corruption and routine cost overruns. To begin, the President should choose a Secretary of Defense who will act as a steward of the nation's bank account as well as its security and instruct the new Secretary to formulate an action plan for cutting misspending within the first 100 days of service, with reasonable benchmarks to measure success or failure.

Fundamentally, the new Secretary must tackle the lack of integration among the three decision support systems (budgeting, requirements generation, and acquisition management) that make up the larger defense acquisition enterprise. As a result, the Pentagon's acquisition process lacks the capability to predict accurately what systems need to be procured, what their costs are, what the delivery schedule is, and how the systems will perform. Elements of acquisition reform should include: generation of joint needs, rebuilding the workforce to better manage acquisition, and opening the market to greater competition. (An online appendix to this paper at the Opportunity '08 website looks at this issue in detail.)

In order to reduce the proliferation of cost overruns, the government must take full advantage of the market, reversing a trend in which the market is taking advantage of the government. A regularized system of incentives must be offered to firms that come in *under* budget, including preference status for future contract bids. For firms that fail to honor their contracts, penalties must be enforced, in order to ensure the cycle is broken. Penalties could include greater use of financial sanctions and novel schemes, such as the removal of a firm from pending or future contract bids.

When it comes to penalizing corruption and war profiteering, no measure should be spared, as these practices both eviscerate the budget and undermine morale and values. Because supplemental appropriations have been prone to the most abuse, the next President should instruct the Department of Defense to create a special task force of inspectors for these funds. A new punishment system must significantly raise the costs of such thievery to outweigh its perceived advantages. The sanctions for any firm guilty of profiteering should be immediate and heavy, including the elimination

from bidding on government contracts for a minimum of ten years. The President should work with Congress to double criminal sentences for individuals involved in corruption, and triple them during a time of conflict. The new Attorney General should be asked to explore the possibility of bringing treason charges against individuals who aid and abet the enemy by lining their pockets at the expense of our national security.

## **Concluding Observations**

The United States cannot afford to avoid the hard choices that come with having a military at war. Our military is not broken, but there are clear, unavoidable symptoms of its distress. The challenges in ensuring force quality and filling equipment gaps must be faced now, before they hollow out the force. Building the best military in the world took decades. The next President must ensure it isn't lost in a matter of years.

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## **About the Author and the Project**

### **P. W. Singer**

Peter Warren Singer is a senior fellow and director of the 21st Century Defense Initiative at Brookings. He has written two books on changes in modern warfare. Singer lectures frequently to U.S. military audiences. He also has served on the Balkans Task Force in the U.S. Department of Defense.

Opportunity 08 aims to help 2008 presidential candidates and the public focus on critical issues facing the nation, presenting policy ideas on a wide array of domestic and foreign policy questions. The project is committed to providing both independent policy solutions and background material on issues of concern to voters.

## Additional Resources

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