



USA: to retain the best, the Army must stop treating them like numbers

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Last November, the United States Army delivered an unexpected "**Christmas gift**" in advance to 800 non-commissioned officers: an order for immediate transfer to the Fort Knox recruitment school for eight weeks, with just a few days' notice. No one had asked them if this was compatible with family needs, career plans, or the operational priorities of their originating units. After the course, they would be sent to operate as recruiters in often remote locations, causing forced resignations of spouses and school transfers in the middle of the academic year for their children.

This episode, which angered many of those involved, is symptomatic of a broader crisis: that of a rigid, centralized, and impersonal personnel system that treats soldiers as interchangeable pawns. But above all, it is **a sign that even the most powerful armed force in the world is beginning to question its personnel management model**. Because the real problem, many American analysts now say, is not so much "how to increase recruitment" as "why can't

we retain those who are already in.”

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A system designed for another century

The current system of the United States Army was born **in the 1940s, during the transition to a mass army based on compulsory conscription**. To make the short-term flow of soldiers manageable, a **centralized model based on scientific management, standardized careers, competitive evaluations, and the principle of “up or out” - mandatory promotion or exclusion** was adopted. An efficient system for managing millions of conscripts, but dehumanizing.

With the introduction of the All-Volunteer Force in 1973, a return to a long-term model was hoped for: less turnover, more loyalty, higher quality. But the management system remained unchanged. Despite increased pay, the dropout rate did not decrease. Today, the United States Army needs 470,000 new enlistments per year to maintain its ranks, more than anticipated with the volunteer model. A paradox that has led to a recruitment crisis: in 2023, the annual target was missed by 10%, after a dramatic -25% in 2022.

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The end of social crutches

Worsening the situation is the end of some “structural” factors that for decades had supported the All-Volunteer Force. Wage stagnation and lack of opportunities for certain categories – particularly for African Americans and the Southern population – had made enlistment a competitive choice. But **today the economy has recovered, opportunities have diversified, and the traditional pool of recruits has shrunk**.

Another crucial factor is the end of the post-9/11 “patriotic push”. After the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the sense of mission linked to wars has faded. Only 9% of young people between 16 and 21 say they are willing to consider a military career. And **according to internal surveys, only 53% of soldiers would recommend enlistment to a loved one**.

A cultural problem, not just numerical

The discontent is not just a matter of numbers. It's cultural. **The logic of “everyone is replaceable,” peer competitive evaluations, continuous top-down imposed transfers, and lack of stability are eroding cohesion and a sense of belonging.**

This is where the increasingly discussed proposal comes into play – a **return to a decentralized, human, and professional model**. A model based on long-term stays, flexible careers, and stable territorial assignments, similar to the regimental system still in use in the British and Canadian armies. These armies, not coincidentally, have lower suicide rates and lower dropout rates compared to the American one.

The return to cohesion

The current system fragments human and professional relationships. Soldiers move continuously, do not know their commanders, do not build lasting bonds. This not only undermines motivation but also affects operational efficiency. A platoon that works together for years will be more cohesive, more prepared, and more effective.

Careers, in the pre-1940 model, were flexible and mission-oriented. Officers like Matthew Ridgeway spent years in “non-conventional” assignments (teaching, foreign missions, strategic planning), developing diverse skills and strategic vision. Today, such careers are almost impossible, crushed by a logic of rigid and bureaucratic advancement.

Decentralize to humanize

A turning point could be represented by the adoption of a divisional system, where each division autonomously manages its personnel: hiring, promotions, special assignments like instructors and recruiters. This creates direct responsibility, develops a sense of community, and encourages real growth paths.

Furthermore, the competitive evaluation system introduced post-war could finally be abandoned. **Studies and private companies show that this model lowers productivity, generates cynicism, and inhibits cooperation. Promotion could return to being**

decided locally, based on direct knowledge of the person, not a box to check.

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The family wants its share too

Another non-negligible element is the impact that a military career has on families. Today, almost 50% of military wives earn as much or more than their spouse, but the unemployment rate for military wives is triple the average. In a 2021 survey, **almost half of the soldiers indicated the negative impact of military life on the partner's career as one of the main reasons for leaving the army.**

Stabilizing assignments, avoiding continuous transfers, and valuing permanence in the same location would help build stronger families, longer careers, and a more attractive army.

A better product sells itself

Recruitment works when the “product” is good. If the military experience is enriching, human, professional, and stable, there is no need for million-dollar advertising campaigns to attract new soldiers. As an old saying goes: *a good product sells itself*. And this is precisely the lesson that even the United States Army is beginning to learn.

The time of mass, impersonal, and bureaucratic armies is over. The future – even in America – lies in a return to the soldier as a professional, as a person, as a human being.

News link: <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/ending-the-churn-to-solve-the-recruiting-crisis-the-army-should-be-asking-very-different-questions/>