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POLITICS AND POLICY

Armed Forces Seek to Enlist New Voters

Bush Is Seen to Have Edge Among Service Members, But Iraq Concerns May Boost Kerry

By CHRISTOPHER COOPER

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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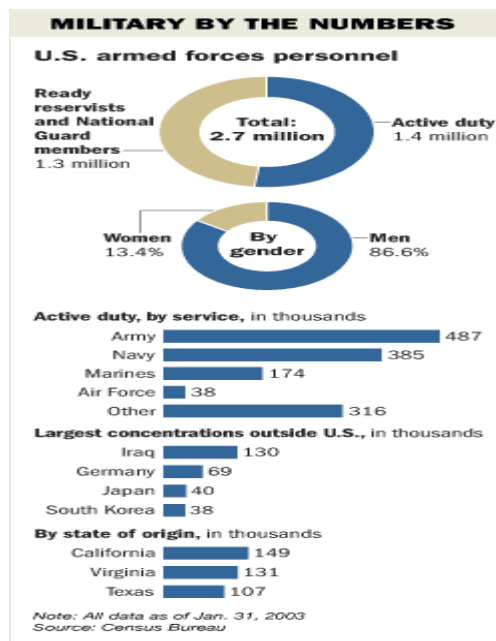
(See Corrections & Amplifications item [below](#)⁰.)

When U.S. Army Spc. Colby Buzzell's squad in Iraq was asked who wanted to vote this November, only one soldier raised his hand -- and he quickly lowered it when nobody followed suit, Spc. Buzzell recalls.

The Army's response was swift. Soldiers were told to show up at formation at 8 a.m. the next day with ID cards and pens. At this mass muster of about 150 soldiers, an Army captain delivered a stirring defense of the Constitution, reminding soldiers of the responsibilities of citizenship and the benefits of the American way.

"He didn't order us to register, but he told us that it was un-American if we didn't," Spc. Buzzell says in a phone conversation. Nearly every soldier headed for the temporary tables set up on the perimeter of the dusty parade ground and registered to vote. If the system operates correctly, they will receive absentee ballots in October before the Nov. 2 election.


The incident underscores the watchword of the 2004 presidential race: mobilization. With the big issues of war and economic anxiety on the table, political parties and affected constituencies are sparing little effort to register potential voters and assure their voices are heard. And no constituency is affected more by presidential policy than the 130,000 service personnel who constitute a sprawling precinct in Iraq.



Analysts have widely assumed that soldiers and reservists will side with President Bush, who has repeatedly invoked his solidarity with service members in well-received visits to military bases, to troops in Baghdad and, famously, to an aircraft-carrier deck. But some unease over the postwar occupation of Iraq suggests that Democratic nominee Sen. John Kerry might have his own following among the rank and file, even if the upper ranks remain a Republican redoubt.

Support for Mr. Kerry could be especially evident among the 160,000 or so National Guard and reserve forces who have been called up to supplement the regular Army in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of these reservists have been tapped for duty more than once since the terrorist attacks of September 2001,

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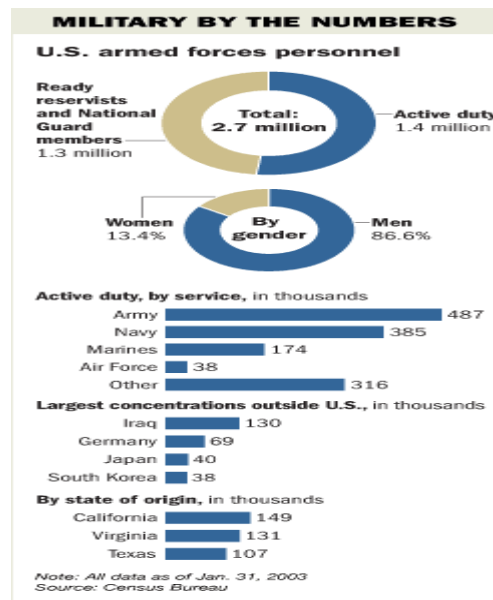
CAMPAIGN 2004



¹ Keep up² with the latest news on the campaign trail at our **Campaign 2004**³

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- **Capital Journal: Early Ballots Could Weigh Heavily**⁴
08/18/04



and this "backdoor draft," as some call it, clearly has bred some resentment toward the incumbent.

No Agreement

Anecdotal evidence suggests that even regular Army soldiers are far from unanimous agreement over the decision to wage war in Iraq. "That captain's speech sparked some big-time political

discussions around the base," says Spc. Buzzell, a regular Army soldier. "I think people back home would be shocked to find out how many soldiers could end up voting for Kerry." Because Pentagon policy forbids partisan politicking on U.S. bases, even the parties appear unsure of the way the average soldier is leaning in the coming election. An NBC-Wall Street Journal poll conducted in late June gave Mr. Bush a slight edge of 47% to 45% among respondents living in the U.S. who identified themselves as members of "active military families." But it was a small sample of only 120 people.

Still, if the 2000 election is any guide, the overseas vote will be significant. In that year, overseas balloting swung the presidential race by delivering Florida to Mr. Bush. Republicans Abroad International, a Washington organization that seeks to get out the expatriate vote, says overseas ballots in 2000 also changed the outcome for two U.S. senators and six House members.

Both sides are injecting a bit of star power into their expatriate voting efforts. Republicans Abroad is rolling out Mr. Bush's Hispanic nephew to drum up support in Mexico, while Diana Kerry, Mr. Kerry's sister and head of Democrats Abroad, recently visited Mexico and Canada and plans a trip to London in early September.

Registration Surging

This year, members of both parties say registration of the estimated six million American expatriates is surging, especially in Europe. Democrats, who have created a one-stop Web site where Americans from all states can fill out balloting forms, have seen registration jump 42% in Britain over 2000, says Margo Miller, a London lawyer who coordinates the effort. Ms. Miller says "a surprising number" of soldiers appear to be using the site. Though the site is technically nonpartisan, with forms for all party registrations, Ms. Miller says the site most likely is being used by Democrats. "Republicans shouldn't be counting on the military," she says.

Under longstanding executive orders, the Pentagon is charged with providing voter registration materials to both military and civilian expatriates, as well as training registrars, such as the one that addressed Spc. Buzzell's company in Mosul. Charles Abell, principal deputy undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, recently told reporters that the Pentagon so far has conducted 157 training sessions for registrars this year -- nearly triple the number conducted in 2000.

"We are pushing awareness in every way that we can imagine," Mr. Abell says. This includes putting up banners on bases, running spots on the Pentagon's internal satellite-television channel and clipping

trailers to movies shown on military bases. The deadline for registering soldiers is Sept. 11, Mr. Abell says, and soldiers are being asked to cast their ballots by Oct. 15.

Whether the huge effort will translate into more overseas votes remains to be seen. While many states have streamlined the process, voting by overseas absentee ballot remains complicated. States have differing standards for absentee balloting, and in some places, "local elections people are looking for any reason to throw these people off the rolls," Ms. Miller says.

Antiquated Methods

In the absence of Internet voting, which was shelved for this year over concerns about the systems' security, the collection of overseas ballots relies heavily on antiquated delivery methods in many parts of the world. Though mail sent through an embassy pouch can be delivered within a week, envelopes sent through the military's notoriously balky postal system can take three weeks or more to reach their destination.

One of the more significant changes since 2000 is that 32 states now allow overseas voters to send their ballots by fax, following up with the original ballot by mail. A handful of states even allow balloting by e-mail.

But there are relatively few fax machines in Iraq and Afghanistan. "There's a lot of money put toward Internet voting but I wish they'd just spend it on the military postal system," says Joan Hills, global co-chairman of Republicans Abroad. "It's going to be very hard for the military in some places to vote."

Nonetheless, Ms. Hills says her committee plans a street presence in Iraq -- "Baghdadis For Bush," to counter the Democrats' "Donkeys in the Desert." The two groups will attempt to get out the vote for their respective parties among civilian expatriates and soldiers in Iraq.

Meanwhile, Spc. Buzzell says the captain's speech motivated him to vote, though his leanings seem destined to disappoint both major parties. "I know it's trendy but I registered as an independent," the San Francisco native says. "I'm think I'm going for Ralph Nader."

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Corrections & Amplifications:

Diana Kerry, sister of Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry, heads the group Americans Overseas for Kerry. This article incorrectly said that she is head of Democrats Abroad.

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