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To: jeffrey E.
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CRUISING a Walmart in Clayton County, Georgia, with Sergeant Russell Haney of US army recruiting, it would be easy to think most Americans are aching to serve Uncle Sam. Almost every teenager or 20-something he hails, in his cheery Tennessee drawl, amid the mounds of plastic bucket and cut-price tortilla chips, appears tempted by his offer. Lemeafa, a 1-year-old former football star, says he is halfway sold on it; Dseanna, an 18-year-old shopper, says she is too, provided she won't have to go to war. Serving in the coffee shop, Archel and Lily, a brother and sister from the US Virgin Islands, listen greedily to the education, training and other benefits the recruiting sergeant reels off. "You don't want a job, you want a career!" he tells them, as a passer-by thrusts a packet of cookies into his hands, to thank him for his service.

Southern, poorer than the national average, mostly black and with longstanding ties to the army, the inhabitants of Clayton County are among the army's likeliest recruits. Last year they furnished it with more soldiers than most of the rest of the greater Atlanta area put together. Yet Sergeant Haney's battalion, which is responsible for it, still failed to make its annual recruiting target—and a dry out with the unit suggests why.

Much of the friendly reception for Sergeant Haney he puts down to fine southern manners; in fact, no one in Walmart is likely to enlist. Lemeafa has a tattoo behind his ear, an immediate disqualifier. Dseanna has a one-year-old baby, and would have to sign away custody of him. Lily's girlfriend has a toddler she does not want to leave; Archel won't leave his sister. Even the cookie-giver is less propitious than he seems: he symbolises, Sergeant Haney says ruefully, as he bins his gift, that paying lip-service to the armed forces—as opposed to doing military service, is all most Americans are good for.

In a society given to ostentatious public obeisance to the services—during National Military Appreciation Month, on Military Spouse Day and on countless other such public holidays and occasions—the figures that support this claim are astonishing. In the financial year that ended on September 30th America's four armed services—army, navy, air force and marines—aimed to recruit 177,000 people, mainly from among the 21m Americans aged 17-21. Yet all struggled, and the army, which accounted for nearly half that target, made its number at great cost and the eleventh hour, only by cannibalising its store of recruits for the current year. It failed by 2,000 to meet its target of 17,300 recruits for the army reserve, which is becoming more important to national security as the full-time army shrinks from a recent peak of 566,000 to a projected 440,000 by 2019; its lowest level since the second world war. "I find it remarkable," says the commander of army recruiting, Major-General Jeffrey Snow. "That we have been in two protracted land campaigns and we have an American public that thinks very highly of the military, yet the vast majority has lost touch with it. Less than 1% of Americans are willing and able to serve."

That is part of a longstanding trend: a growing disconnect between American society and the armed forces that claim to represent it, which has many causes, starting with the ending of the draft in 1973. Ever since, military experience has been steadily fading from American life. In 1990, 40% of young Americans had at least one parent who had served in the forces; by 2014, only 16% had, and the measure continues to fall. Among American leaders, the decline is similarly pronounced. In 1981, 64% of congressmen were veterans; now around 18% are.

Seasonal factors, including a strengthening labour market and negative media coverage of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, have widened the gap. So have the dismal standards of education and physical fitness that prevail in modern American society. At a time of post-war introspection, these factors raise two big questions. The first concerns America's ability to hold to account a military sector its leaders feel bound to applaud, but no longer competent to criticise. Andrew Bacevich, a former army officer, academic and longstanding critic of what he terms the militarism of American society, derides that support as "superficial and fraudulent". Sanctified by politicians and the public, he argues, the army's top brass have been given too much power and too little scrutiny, with the recent disastrous campaigns, and similarly profligate appropriations, the almost inevitable result. The second question raised by the civil-military disconnect is similarly fundamental: it concerns America's future ability to mobilise for war.

During the Korean war, around 70% of draft-age American men served in the armed forces; during Vietnam, the unpopularity of the conflict and ease of draft-dodging ensured that only 43% did. These days, even if every young American wanted to join up, less than 30% would be eligible to. Of the starting 21m, around 9.5m would fail a rudimentary academic qualification, either because they had dropped out of high school or, typically, because most young Americans cannot do tricky sums without a calculator. Of the remainder, 7m would be disqualified because they are too fat, or have a criminal record, or tattoos on their hands or faces. According to Sergeant Haney, about half the high-school students in Clayton County are inked somewhere or other; according to his boss, Lieutenant-Colonel Tony Parilli, a bigger problem is simply that "America is obese."

Spurned by the elite

That leaves 4.5m young Americans eligible to serve, of whom only around 390,000 are minded to, provided they do not get snapped up by a college or private firm instead—as tends to happen to the best of them. Indeed, a favourite mantra of army recruiters, that they are competing with Microsoft and Google, is not really true. With the annual exception of a few hundred sons and daughters of retired officers, America's elite has long since turned its nose up at military service. Well under 10% of army recruits have a college degree; nearly half belong to an ethnic minority.

The pool of potential recruits is too small to meet America's—albeit shrunken, military needs; especially, as now, when the unemployment rate dips below 6%. This leaves the army, the least-favoured of the four services, having either to drop its standards or entice those not minded to serve with generous perks. After it failed to meet its recruiting target in 2005, a time of high employment and bad news from Baghdad, it employed both strategies zealously. To sustain what was, by historical standards, only a modest surge in Iraq, around 2% of army recruits were accepted despite having failed to meet academic and other criteria; "We accepted a risk on quality," grimaces General Snow, an Iraq veteran. Meanwhile the cost of the army's signing-on bonuses ballooned unsustainably, to \$860m in 2008 alone.

That figure has since fallen, as part of a wider effort to peg back the personnel costs that consume around a quarter of the defence budget. Yet the remaining sweeteners are still generous: the army's pay and allowances have risen by 90% since 2000. In a role-play back at Sergeant Haney's recruiting station, your correspondent, posing as an aimless school-leaver, asked what the army could offer him. The answer, besides the usual bed, board and medical insurance, included \$78,000 in college fees, some of which could be transferred to a close relative; professional training, including for 46 jobs that still offer a fat signing-on bonus; and post-service careers advice. Could the army perhaps also overlook the youthful drugs misdemeanour your correspondent, in character, admitted to? Sergeant Fred Pedro thought it could.

It is a good offer, especially set against the bad jobs and wage stagnation prevalent among the Americans it is mostly aimed at. That the army is having such trouble selling it is partly testament to the effects on public opinion of its recent

wars. In the three decades following America's withdrawal from Vietnam, in 1973, the army fought a dozen small wars and one big one, the first Gulf war, in which it suffered only a few hundred casualties in total. Even as Americans grew apart from their soldiers, therefore, they were also encouraged to forget that war usually entails killing on both sides.

In that blithe context, America's 5,366 combat deaths, and tens of thousands of wounded, in Iraq and Afghanistan have come as a terrible shock. Most young Americans associate the army with "coming home broken, physically, mentally and emotionally", says James Ortiz, director of army marketing. Almost every member of the journalism class at D.M. Therrell High School in Atlanta concurs with that: "I'd maybe join if there's no other option. But I just don't like the violence," shudders 16-year-old Mayowa.

Decades of army advertising that focused largely on the college money and other perks of service probably added to the misapprehension. "Americans do not understand the army, so do not value it," says Mr Ortiz. A marketing campaign launched last year, Enterprise Army, instead emphasises the high values and good works the army seeks to promulgate. Yet it will take more than this to turn Americans back to a life which many consider incompatible with atomised, sceptical, irreverent modern living. Moreover, it is also likely that, when the army next needs to surge, it will be for a war much bloodier than the recent ones. America's biggest battlefield advantage in recent decades, its mastery of precision-guided weapons, is fading, as these become widely available even to the bigger militant groups, such as Hamas or Hizbullah.

The result is that America may be unable, within reasonable cost limits and without reinstituting the draft, to raise the much bigger army it might need for such wars. "Could we field the force we would need?" asks Andrew Krepinevich of the Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. Probably not: "The risk is that our desire to ask only those who are willing to fight to do so is pricing us out of some kinds of warfare."