

Military's Anguish

By **George C. Wilson**

■ The stage is set for our armed services to relive the worst days of the 1970s when discipline broke down, crime ran rampant, race relations soured, many of the best and brightest in the junior officer corps left the military in disgust, planes couldn't fly and ships couldn't sail for want of spare parts and technical specialists.

Generals, admirals and Defense secretaries favored buying new over fixing up the old, generating a readiness crisis.

It doesn't take a crystal ball to make those predictions, just time in grade.

I saw all that happen from up close in the 1970s as a military correspondent for *The Washington Post*. The same dynamics that almost ruined the American military for good in the 1970s are in play right now. The relevant congressional committees — Armed Services, Budget, Appropriations, Oversight and Government Reform — need to take a hard look next year at the health of the armed services and either make some quick fixes or watch a rerun of that tragic Vietnam-era movie.

"I don't know how I can save the Army as an institution," Gen. William Westmoreland, the Army's chief of staff, lamented to *Post* Executive Editor Benjamin Bradlee in 1971. The justifiably alarmed Bradlee ordered Haynes Johnson and me to interview Army people at all levels in the United States and overseas to find out what the problems were and describe them in print.

The resulting newspaper series and book, both entitled "Army in Anguish," had an impact because it was Army people talking about the sad state of their own Army, not reporters making sweeping judgments.

The basic problem during the Vietnam War and its aftermath was the same as it is today, especially for the Army and Marine Corps.

There were, and are, not enough high-quality young men and women willing to serve in the military that had gotten into a war that most of the public didn't give a damn about. The generals looked back, then and now, and saw most citizens were not following them.

Yet the armed services, starting in 1973 when draft calls were suspended, were ordered by the president to fill vacancies in their ranks only with volunteers, no matter what it took.

The manpower problem is worse this time around, especially for the Army and Marine Corps, because the Pentagon master plan calls for those two services to get bigger at the very time parents and their children are turned off by another hard-to-explain war.

So what are Army leaders doing to ease their manpower crunch?

Lowering admission standards, even to forgiving criminal records in some cases; raising the age limit; offering comparatively huge bonuses to enlist or re-enlist.

I've seen the movie. Watch for exposes of military recruiters desperate to meet manpower quotas falsifying credentials of volunteers; for military stockades to fill up again as discipline breaks down; for race relations to deteriorate; for the brain drain to get worse as many of the best and brightest in the junior officer corps quit.

True, **House Ways and Means Chairman Rangel** has introduced a bill to bring back the draft, which would certainly solve the armed services' numbers problems.

But his heart is clearly not in it, certainly not in this political season.

Rangel went so far as to vote against his own bill in October 2004 when the Republican House majority called it up under suspension of the rules to embarrass the Democratic minority.

Also, this year Rangel's conscription bill was referred to the House Ways and Means Committee, but he chose to let it lie there rather than push it forward. (His bill was also referred to Armed Services.)

Congress, with its constitutional mandate to provide for the common defense, could do itself, the nation, the next president and the military a favor by divvying up the hot button defense issues among its committees, dig out the facts and set them down in hard-hitting reports to guide the actions of the new Congress and new president in 2009.

Defense issues that need exploring include these:

* Who should bear the burden of defending the country? Is it healthy for a democracy to rely on this American version of an all-volunteer French Foreign Legion? My own view is that the recruiting budgets, including enlistment bonuses, should be capped and the vacancies that could not be filled with high-quality volunteers should be filled with qualified conscripts who would be subject to being drafted in their 18th year.

There are 4 million male and female 18-year-olds in the United States to draw from. Those called up by lottery but deemed unfit would serve somewhere else in government. No deferments or exemptions except for the severely handicapped.

* Procurement death spiral. How bad is it? Because the cost of weapons — like the Air Force F-22 fighter, Marine V-22 Osprey jump jet and Navy ships — have skyrocketed, fewer can be afforded, raising their individual price tag as savings from a big order are lost. Old weapons have to stay in service longer, perhaps dangerously long.

* True cost of national defense. What is it, counting homeland defense and the cost of caring for the military's physically and mentally wounded, and what choices — including

canceling politically popular weapons — do the Congress and president have to make in 2009 to pay the gigantic bill?

Congress should address these and other defense issues next year before the elephant already in the living room gets too big to tame.

■ **"Forward Observer,"** an insider's look at defense and military topics, appears every other Monday in **CongressDailyAM**. Special Correspondent George C. Wilson can be reached at gwilson@nationaljournal.com.