

A Few Good Voters

Despite Iraq, the military is still reliably Republican.

By Daniel McCarthy

IN THE WEEKS leading up to Saddam Hussein's capture many in the press began to predict that President Bush might be in danger of losing the support of voters in the military. Stories ran in the *Washington Monthly*, *Salon.com*, *Business Week*, and elsewhere cataloging the armed forces' growing discontentment with the administration: the stop-loss orders retaining personnel who were due to leave the services, the extended deployment of reservists and National Guards accustomed to serving one weekend a month, and the litany of criticisms coming from retired officers blasting the administration's Iraq policy—retired Gen. Anthony Zinni, for example, called the whole thing a “brain fart.” All of this, taken together, suggested that Iraq might be on the verge of doing to the Republican Party what Vietnam had done to the Democrats.

Fewer such stories have appeared since the deposed Iraqi leader was pulled out of his hole in the ground last December. Even before that, however, there was little real chance of Bush losing the affections of the nation's men and women under arms. The Military Times company—publisher of the *Army Times* and other newspapers for each of the services—surveyed its active-duty readership between Nov. 3 and Dec. 17, providing a rare insight into political opinion within the military. The study found that 67 percent of servicemen and women generally approved of the president's job performance. 57 percent identified themselves as Republicans; 53 per-

cent said they were either conservative or very conservative. By contrast, only 13 percent were Democrats, and just 7 percent called themselves liberal or very liberal. Despite the strain the Iraq war has imposed on the services, the military remains a Republican stronghold.

But Iraq *has* been a strain, the poll found. Fewer respondents approved of the president's handling of Iraq—56 percent—than approved of his overall performance as president. And an overwhelming 77 percent agreed or strongly agreed when asked whether today's military is stretched too thin to be effective. In light of such sentiments, Peter Feaver, a political science professor at Duke University who studies the military, says that Bush may not have as tight of a lock on the armed forces' vote in 2004 as he did in 2000. “The war on Iraq has been mixed enough that it dampens some of the one-sided positive evaluations that Bush would get, but it hasn't been such a negative that it's like the Vietnam War,” he says.

The military vote is small but significant. In 2000, it made a president. George W. Bush won the Florida recount by 537 votes. He picked up a net gain of 739 votes in that state from overseas absentee ballots, most of which are sure to have come from military personnel. Barring an exact reprise of the 2000 deadlock, there is little chance that the military vote's direct effect on the race this year will be so dramatic. But it has a larger importance out of proportion to its electoral weight. For one thing, other, larger segments of the

voting public look to the military's relationship with the two major political parties before casting their own ballots. These groups include veterans, of whom there are some 27 million, and an even larger number of “national security voters” without any military experience, but for whom defense is the paramount issue at the polls.

Taking notice of these demographics, Democrats across the country have lately sought to burnish their credentials on military issues, usually to little effect. In 2002, Democrat Bill McBride, running for governor of Florida, campaigned aggressively on his background as a veteran, only to lose in a landslide to Jeb Bush. That same year in Georgia, Democratic Sen. Max Cleland, a decorated veteran, lost the endorsement of the Veterans of Foreign Wars—as well as the election—to Republican challenger Saxby Chambliss. This year, of the top contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination, Sen. John Kerry and retired Gen. Wesley K. Clark both have considerable military experience, although in General Clark's case his appeal to the uniformed services may be qualified by his icy relations with many of his past colleagues.

But whether or not the Democrats can deprive President Bush of any significant portion of the military vote this year may depend less on what they do than on what missteps the president makes. There are plenty of opportunities for those. In going to war with Iraq, the president has created a political

minefield for himself so far as the military goes. Swelling casualty counts—over 2,800 American servicemen so far have been wounded in the ongoing conflict—threaten to overwhelm military and Veterans Administration hospitals already facing a budget crunch. To offset some of medical system's costs, the Bush administration is considering raising the fees that military retirees pay for prescription drugs through Tricare, the uniformed services' health insurance program, and instituting new fees for drugs retirees obtain at military hospitals and clinics. It is a tremendously unpopular idea. According to Knight Ridder Tribune News Services, the prospect prompted the Military Officers Association of America to send a "special report" to its 390,000 members warning them that "... the administration seems to continue going out of its way to penalize the military community."

Another problem for President Bush arising from the Iraq conflict is the matter of re-employment rights for National Guards and reservists returning from Iraq; some of them have been away from their civilian jobs for over a year. The administration has yet to enact regulations to implement the Uniformed Services Employment and Re-employment Act (USERRA) of 1994, which the Clinton administration similarly failed to do.

Retired Rear Adm. James Carey, who broadly supports the president's policy in Iraq, is appalled by this foot-dragging. "I can understand why the Clinton administration sat on this for six years," he says, "just because of their general outlook on matters military. I can't believe that the Bush administration, which has had three years to get this done, hasn't done it. It's not that they haven't said they'd do it, but they've now missed three or four deadlines." Carey heads the National Defense Committee, a military-issues advocacy group that plans to make USERRA regulations its top priority in 2004.

President Bush has faced little criticism from within the active-duty military over the conduct of the Iraq campaign itself, however. There have indeed been complaints, especially from the Army, but they are more often directed against Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld than the president. By some accounts, Rumsfeld is the most disliked defense secretary among the officers' corps since Robert McNamara.

Richard Kohn, a professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and former Chief Historian of the Air Force, attributes much of the hostility toward Rumsfeld to such things as "his tampering with strategy, his refusal to admit that the military is overstretched, the slowness with which he responds to certain problems, like the reserve-Guard and reserve-active-duty mix, [and] his enthusiasm for certain weapons systems and units like special forces." Even more than his stubbornness and penchant for micro-management, however, Kohn thinks that Rumsfeld's attitude contributes to his difficult relationship with the officer corps. "He's

suffered serious erosion during the Clinton era, when partisan and ideological differences between the armed forces and their commander-in-chief led to very public disputes over the status of gays in the military and other issues, and saw some junior officers speak with open contempt for the president. As a philanderer, draft-dodger, apparent drug user, and habitual prevaricator, Clinton looked to many in the armed forces like the embodiment of everything they abhorred in the political Left. The man, as well as his policies, proved to be more than the officers were willing to tolerate, according to Kohn. "[I]t just triggered some kind of psychic break, and I think it led to an outburst of improper and unprofessional behavior the like of which I had never seen or heard of in American history, and as an historian I study the subject."

Will the same problems arise under the next Democratic administration? Kohn believes the military has learned from its experiences under Clinton, but notes that "it's much more difficult for the military as a whole to work for a

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dismissive and peremptory and sometimes abusive in person; clearly some people don't want to work for him." Kohn cites Rumsfeld's treatment of former Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric Shinseki as a particular example of the secretary's worst traits. Among other things, Rumsfeld undercut Shinseki by announcing the general's retirement 14 months in advance.

But Kohn credits Rumsfeld with at least exercising civilian authority over the military in a firm, if often high-handed, fashion. Such authority had

Democrat president, and you saw the kind of anger at Al Gore and the whole argument over the Florida voting and counting." And Florida in 2000 was not the first or only time that Democrats apparently tried to compensate for the Republican advantage among military voters by challenging the legitimacy of servicemen's votes. Samuel Wright, a captain in the U.S. Naval Reserve who has made it a personal crusade to fight for military voting rights, tells of cases from Texas to Alaska of absentee ballots from soldiers, sailors, airmen and

Marines being challenged for seemingly political reasons. He also cites instances of Democrats simply neglecting military voters altogether. For example, the Department of Defense's Voter Information Center offers a service in which military personnel can call a hotline to hear pre-recorded messages from, and obtain contact information for, their senators and congressmen. Twenty-two Republican senators and 145 House Republicans use the service, compared to only two Democrats in the Senate and 16 in the House.

Such things exacerbate the political polarization of the armed forces, and the consequences of that polarization worry analysts like Peter Feaver. "[I]t leads to incoming commanders-in-chief questioning the loyalty of senior military advisors on whose advice they would depend—leads to purges of whole cadres of senior officers." It also runs the risk of turning the military into a political football, Feaver warns:

The idea that we want to treat the military as just another interest group like African-Americans or disabled Americans, or gays, or whatever—that we're going to try to peel off folks from this to have them vote for us—that leads to trouble because the military occupies a special place in American life. It's a little like carving an electoral strategy to get judges to vote for me. That's a problem. Obviously, judges should be allowed to vote, but you don't want to have a political strategy that's aimed at getting the judiciary to vote for you or at denying them the vote.

What is more, the ideological polarization of the military contributes to a larger disjunction between the armed forces and American society as a whole, what Thomas Ricks, a *Washington Post* reporter specializing in military affairs,

called in a 1997 *Atlantic* article "the growing gap between the military and society." Ricks followed the development of several young recruits to the Marines from basic training to their post-graduation leave. He found that when they returned home they felt alienated from their old lives and thought of civilian society as something both foreign and morally inferior. On that last point, the recent *Military Times* poll provides evidence that such sentiments are not limited to Marines. The survey

Something that Clinton Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has in common with Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld is that both ordered the military to mobilize in ways that senior officers objected to on prudential grounds. Something Albright once said might just as well have come from Rumsfeld: "What good is the military if you can't use it?"

The civilian-military gap began to emerge with the end of the draft. The conscript army, for obvious reasons, presented more of a cross-section of Ameri-

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reported that 66 percent of respondents felt that members of the U.S. military have "higher moral values" than civilians. A plurality, 40 percent, disagreed or strongly disagreed when asked whether the nation's civilian leadership has their best interests at heart.

The effects of these sentiments are muted somewhat while a Republican is in the White House and the political differences between civilians and the armed forces are minimized. But even with a Republican in office, the gap can have serious consequences; Rumsfeld's clashes with the Army brass are but one example. Perversely, the upshot is much the same under a Republican as under a Democrat, despite the military's own partisan preferences. In both cases, the gulf between military and civilian leadership means a civilian command less able to understand the armed forces' perspective, and less inclined to take top-ranking officers seriously when they advise against sending too few troops into combat in too many places.

Under Republicans and Democrats alike, the civilians are the ones favoring more deployments with fewer resources.

can public opinion and political beliefs. But it is not just self-selection that accounts for the partisan turn the armed forces—whose officer class carefully cultivated political neutrality from World War II to Vietnam—have taken. The loss of faith in civilian command occasioned by the Vietnam conflict played its part, as have changes in domestic political geography—the Republicanization of the South has augmented the military's Republican tendencies, since more bases are to be found there and more recruits come from that region.

Suggestions for overcoming the gap range from electing more veterans to Congress to expanding ROTC programs in order to introduce more liberal-minded college students into the ranks of officers. At an extreme, some have suggested bringing back the draft. For the foreseeable future, though, the political and cultural distinctness of the military will persist, and is something that both major parties should give careful thought to, with an eye toward ameliorating the fact rather than exploiting it. The odds of that happening, however, must be considered depressingly small. ■

The Sphinx in Winter

America's burgeoning trade deficits threaten Greenspan's legacy.

By Eamonn Fingleton

FOR THOSE WHO WATCH the American economy, the Internet boasts few more useful resources than the Web site of the Federal Reserve. In a few clicks you can mine data on everything from the level of interest rates on Black Monday to the growth of steel production under Eisenhower. Whether the topic is the trend in semiconductor prices, the impact of weather on retailing, or the most efficacious way for corporations to break bad financial news, someone at the Fed has studied it and has posted his findings.

Strangely, though, one crucial economic concern gets short shrift: international trade. Not only are there no trade statistics, but America's perennially rising trade deficits have received virtually no attention from the Fed's monograph writers in recent years.

This blindspot faithfully reflects the mindset at the top. Fed chairman Alan Greenspan consistently tiptoes around the subject of trade. Indeed, the worse America's trade figures have become, the less willing he has been to look the trade trend in the eye.

Yet when future historians look back on America's economic performance in recent decades, no problem will loom larger in retrospect than that of the deteriorating trade position—and, as a result, no reputation is destined to come in for more extensive revision than that of the Sphinx of Constitution Avenue.

Although the Fed chairman has no direct control over trade policy, he is in a uniquely powerful position to moderate

the climate of opinion in which that policy is set. It is fair to say that where economic matters are concerned, he enjoys far greater trust than any president. In any case, he has been in office far longer than any president: already he has served under no less than four. Whereas each succeeding president could plausibly spin the trade trend as a temporary aberration and bequeath the painful task of rethinking trade policy to his successor, Greenspan can offer no such alibi. One of his most important responsibilities is to safeguard the value of the dollar. Trade ranks with inflation as one of the two key determinants of the dollar's long-run external purchasing power. Trade, moreover, is of pivotal importance for America's continued leadership of the world community.

Although the press airbrushed the problem out of the picture during the economic euphoria of the late 1990s, the trade deficits never went away. In fact, as the American public is belatedly beginning to discover, they got far worse—so much so that the monthly deficits under George W. Bush are sometimes higher than the total *annual* deficit in his father's last year in office.

In the past year we have seen a dramatic rise in the number of talking heads who openly question American trade policy. In the academic world, MIT economist Lester Thurow has suggested that America's trade deficits could trigger a 50 percent-plus collapse in the dollar's external value, and this in turn would lead to a global depression. Meanwhile

on CNN, Lou Dobbs fulminates nightly about the impact of imports on American manufacturing jobs. In the world of business, critics of U.S. trade policy include that ultimate financial heavyweight, Warren Buffett. Even investment banker Robert Rubin, who as Clinton's treasury secretary did much to create the trade problem, has now added his voice to the hue and cry. Then there is Henry Kissinger. Obliquely criticizing American trade policy at a conference last summer, he suggested that a nation that had lost its manufacturing base could not long remain a world power.

Figures to be published in March will show that expressed as a percentage of GDP the current-account trade gap has now topped the psychologically important 5 percent level. This is the worst performance since American economic records were first published in the 19th century. By comparison, the notorious U.S. trade crisis of 1971-72 was a mere blip. The trade deficit in 1972, at 0.5 percent of GDP, was less than one-tenth the current level. Yet the 1972 trade deficit seemed so troubling in prospect that President Nixon was forced to devalue the dollar and cut its erstwhile "sacred" link with gold.

The recent trade performance stands in particularly stark contrast to America's days of greatest relative economic strength in the first seven decades of the 20th century. This was a period when, thanks mainly to the extraordinary exporting prowess of America's huge