

Gang Warfare

Criminals have found a new way to hone their combat skills: joining the U.S. military.

By Matthew A. Roberts

ON JAN. 9, 2005, Andres Raya caught police in a calculated ambush outside a liquor store in Ceres, California. He shot two officers, killing one, before the police returned fire and killed him. After the incident, detectives discovered that Raya belonged to the Norteños gang. Video from a break-in at Ceres High School showed him throwing gang signs and flashing gang graffiti, and displayed an American flag cut up to spell “F--k Bush” on the floor of the gymnasium. Lance Corporal Raya was a Marine on leave from a tour in Iraq.

Street gangs—particularly Hispanic gangs, the fastest growing in the U.S.—are making major inroads into America’s Armed Forces. Hunter Glass, a retired police detective and gang expert in Fayetteville, N.C., home to Fort Bragg and the 82nd Airborne, knows of members of Florencia 13, Latin Kings, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), Norteños, and Sureños serving in the military. A 2006 report produced by the Los Angeles Joint Drug Intelligence Group also lists the 18th Street Gang, Eastside Longos, and Vagos as having military-trained members. According to the FBI, “Members of nearly every major street gang ... have been documented on military installations both domestically and internationally.”

Glass points out, “The military is merely a reflection of the society it serves. As gangs grow in the U.S., they will grow somewhat comparatively in the military.” But recent figures indicate that gang membership in the Armed

Forced significantly surpasses civilian levels. *Stars and Stripes* reported that 1 to 2 percent of the military are gang members, compared to 0.02 percent of the general population. The proliferation of gang graffiti in Iraq and the prevalence of gang tattoos among soldiers underscores the point.

Hispanic gangs often rumble with black gangs, like the Gangster Disciples and Crips. Members of the Avenues, a Latino gang in Los Angeles, were convicted in 2006 of federal hate crimes for deliberately targeting African-Americans. An informant told the FBI that the Avenues members were under orders to kill blacks on sight in their Highland Park neighborhood.

These rivalries spill over into the military. Texans saw the problem up close after soldiers associated with the Gangster Disciples and Crips transferred from Fort Hood to Fort Bliss in El Paso, where the mestizo gang Barrio Azteca dominates. Reginald Moton, Gang Investigations Supervisor of the El Paso Police Department, recalls an incident on Feb. 20, 2005, when two black men with possible gang connections, a soldier from Fort Bliss and a former soldier recently chaptered out of the military, wrangled with members of Barrio Azteca at a nightclub. Words were exchanged and afterwards, at a nearby fast-food restaurant, the dispute “resulted with both sides of the altercation firing handguns at each other.”

So pronounced is the gang problem at Fort Hood that when 23,000 troops and

their families were slated to transfer to Fort Carlson, Colorado last year, the *Colorado Springs Independent* ran a piece warning, “In recent years, the Chicago-based Gangster Disciples have been active at Fort Hood, and alleged members have been linked to slayings, robberies and drug and gun trafficking. Police in Colorado Springs and Killeen, Texas, which is home to Fort Hood, confirm that they are sharing gang information to prepare for this relocation.”

Gang-related incidents in the military are isolated now, but law-enforcement officials worry about long-term dangers. The Los Angeles Joint Drug Intelligence Group’s report saw a twofold threat. First, gangs “infect America’s armed forces with the degeneration and violence characteristic of gangs,” and some even recruit while serving in the military. Second, gang members return to their gangs “having acquired new soldiering skills and weapons training and pose an even greater threat to civilians and law enforcement.” The report goes on to say that over 100 military-trained gang members in the Los Angeles area “present a latent danger to its residents.” If each of these gang members were to pass on his military training to just four others in LA, they would “overwhelm present law enforcement tactics.”

The tactics of military-trained gang members already overwhelm police. When Andres Raya opened fire with an SKS assault rifle, he used a military tactic known as “slicing the pie.” He was able to outmaneuver police, wounding one

officer. When backup arrived, he defended his position using “suppression fire” before killing a veteran policeman.

“[G]angs are joining the military for a reason,” notes William Gheen, president of Americans for Legal Immigration. “They have an agenda, and it is to gain access to elite weaponry and training.” In fact, many gangs go out of their way to groom prospects for military enlistment. Others benefit from having their juvenile records sealed, fail to report criminal convictions, or use fake documents.

FBI agent Andrea Simmons told the *New York Sun*, “The intelligence that we have thus far indicates that [gangs] may try to recruit young people who have clean records and encourage them to keep their record clean to get into the military. ... They would get great weapons training and other types of training and access to weapons and arms, and be able to use that knowledge.” Hunter Glass adds that although some of the finest soldiers he has known are Hispanic, “Latino gangs ... know very well what they can learn from the military and [what] will assist them in their criminal endeavors.”

Given these threats, why are gang members allowed to infiltrate the Armed Forces? Recruiters are desperate, and the bar has been lowered. “From the perspective of the military command staff, the present need for a large number of troops may outweigh the need for quality troops,” concludes the Los Angeles threat assessment. In 2005, a member of the Latin Kings was recruited by the Army while awaiting trial for attacking a police officer with a razor.

Recent Defense Department statistics indicate that the percentage of Army recruits with high-school diplomas has dropped from 94 percent in 2003 to 70.7 percent. According to the *New York Times*, the number of moral waivers offered for recruits with criminal backgrounds has grown 65 percent,

resulting in 11.7 percent with criminal histories in 2006.

Acknowledging the growing problem, the 2008 Defense Authorization Bill forbids gang membership. (Current regulations only ban membership in organizations that “espouse supremacist causes.”) Representative Mike Thompson, who introduced the amendment, commented in *Stars and Stripes*, “I’ve heard from police officers across the country that there are problems with gangs on posts.” He continued, “The FBI suggests there are problems not only in the states but bases abroad.” But such measures will probably come up short: it’s easy for soldiers to keep their gang affiliations secret.

Furthermore, most members, even if they had a way to leave their gangs, do not want out. Investigator Scott Barfield interviewed 320 soldiers who admitted gang membership, and only two said they wanted to leave. “They’re not here for the red, white and blue. They’re here for the black and gold [the gang colors of the Latin Kings],” Barfield told the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

The tribal loyalties of gangs go back to ancient times and dwell deeper in the psyche than any abstract allegiance to the state. Hunter Glass has found that “gangbanging is a way of life, and gangs act as a replacement for the natural family, so for many this is the only way they know how to act or interact. ... The military cannot stop a gang member from being a gang member anymore than it can stop a Christian from being a Christian.”

And while the government may try to weed out gang members, the problem only intensifies as demand for soldiers increases. Many see increased immigration as the solution. In the *Washington Post*, Max Boot and Michael O’Hanlon wrote that it is “time to consider a new chapter in the annals of American immigration.” We can increase military

recruitment by “inviting foreigners to join the U.S. armed forces in exchange for a promise of citizenship.” A provision in the most recent version of the DREAM Act, which failed to gain cloture last October, would have granted legal status to illegal immigrants who served two years. But young illegal alien males are particularly vulnerable to gang culture, and while most would no doubt serve honorably and welcome citizenship, others might come with conflicting loyalties.

A 2007 FBI assessment pointed out, “Most gang members have been pre-indoctrinated into the gang lifestyle and maintain an allegiance to their gang. This could ultimately jeopardize the safety of other military members and impede gang-affiliated soldiers’ ability to act in the best interest of the country.”

During the recent Capitol Hill hearings, General Petraeus was asked about gang activity in the military. He said that he wasn’t aware of any. Perhaps he hadn’t heard of Juwan Johnson, whose mother encouraged him to join the Army to escape the drugs and gangs back in Baltimore. The young sergeant was decorated for his Iraq service and was back in Germany, due to be discharged in two weeks. He never made it home.

Eight of Johnson’s fellow soldiers handled his brutal initiation into the Gangster Disciples. He was found dead in his barracks the next morning, killed by blunt-force trauma. Two servicemen have been convicted.

Meanwhile, Gangster Disciples graffiti—its initials and distinctive six-pointed star—continues to show up throughout Iraq. “When these cats, these gang members, come back,” Airman First Class Miguel Robinson, a Los Angeles Crip, told ABC, “we’re going to have some hell on these streets.” ■

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Détente in the Taiwan Strait

Lost in the din of Tibetan riots and anti-Chinese protests calling for boycotts of the Beijing Games was the reopening of unofficial, direct negotiations between

the Chinese and Taiwanese governments. This development followed the March landslide victory of Ma Ying-jeou in Taiwan's presidential election and his Kuomintang Party's January victory in the parliamentary elections. In mid-April, the newly elected Taiwanese vice president, Vicent Siew, met Hu Jintao, China's paramount leader, to discuss future economic co-operation between the two states, pointing toward the possibility of establishing regular direct flights between China and Taiwan and a gradual normalization of relations.

Though Siew went as a private citizen, even this much of a thaw in relations is remarkable. The shift in internal Taiwanese politics and Beijing-Taipei relations that the new KMT government represents may be one of the more important changes in world politics in recent years. It also draws attention to the economic flaws and political weakness of former President Chen Shui-bian's pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, as well as confirming the continuation of the "one China" policy espoused by Beijing, Washington, and Taipei.

The DPP never had an overwhelming mandate. It first gained power in 2000 with a plurality of the vote in a race that saw the traditional "Blue" coalition split between rival campaigns. The party won again by a narrow margin in 2004 in the wake of an assassination attempt on Chen, which many of his opponents believe was staged.

Despite Chen's initial popularity and the novelty of breaking the KMT stran-

glehold on power, during the eight years of DPP rule the government was dogged by corruption scandals and an ineffective response to the collapse of the market bubble in 2000. In the same period, China increasingly became the preferred place to do business for Western and Taiwanese companies, putting a party that was hostile to Beijing ever more at odds with the economic interests of the country. In the March election, the DPP's candidate, Frank Hsieh—perceived as the representative of a party lacking any positive agenda beyond symbolic provocations aimed at both Beijing and the KMT—was routed by 17 points.

One of the main commemorative squares in Taipei offers some hint of how obnoxious the years of DPP ascendancy seemed to a majority of Taiwanese. Traditionally named the Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial Hall after the Chinese Nationalist leader and first president of the Republic of China in Taiwan, the square was renamed the "Taiwan National Democracy Memorial Hall" by the DPP, and the monument in which the statue of Chiang is located was festooned with political posters and propaganda for the ruling "Greens." While obviously a symbolic insult to the KMT, these moves also captured the DPP's divisive political style and its contempt for a figure who represents the part of the population that came from mainland China.

These provocations, along with moves like supporting referenda pressing for Taiwanese entry into the UN,

worsened the DPP's already weak political position and have all but guaranteed its minority status for several election cycles to come. This means that the KMT will probably be able to pursue increased economic ties to the mainland, which in turn should open up new trade agreements with a number of other neighboring countries and the United States. The depleted ranks of the KMT will offer limited resistance. Ma's economic and trade agenda holds the possibility that Taiwan, which had been increasingly isolated by Beijing's diplomacy, will become more integrated into the region in the near future.

The rise of an enduring KMT majority and the prospect of reduced tensions between China and Taiwan means that there is less chance of America being drawn into a conflict in the straits. That in turn offers the promise of U.S.-Taiwanese relations less preoccupied with building up Taiwan's military deterrence. It opens the door to a gradual disentanglement of the U.S. from an increasingly outdated Cold War security commitment.

There is no chance that the change of government portends reunification in the foreseeable future, and the political regimes of the two Chinas remain far apart ideologically. But the nationalist legacy of the KMT and the increasingly nationalist political culture of the mainland may provide the basis for a future political consensus. China's intense nationalism has unsettled its neighbors over the last two decades and encouraged Western alarmists to portray China as fascist, yet the emphasis on racial and cultural identity could prove the bridge toward peaceful reunification with Taiwan later in the century. ■