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“The Army We Have” — Young Men, Responsibility, and Leadership for the Twenty-First Century

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Inevitably, the armed services are a mirror held up to the nation. When we look at our soldiers, we see the profile of a generation. This was true of the rag-tag army that coalesced under the leadership of General George Washington, of the massive American forces that fought in two cataclysmic world wars, and of the Vietnam generation. Now, it is true of the current generation as well.

Writing in the June 2007 issue of *The Atlantic*, Brian Mockenhaupt — himself a recent soldier — provides the nation with a compelling analysis of today’s Army and its recruits. The article, “[The Army We Have](#),” should be required reading for all who work with young men, and all who care about the future of the nation.

Today’s Army is all-volunteer, of course. The end of the draft meant the rise of the volunteer army and massive changes in the way the Army operates. But, as Mockenhaupt makes clear, the current generation of young men presents the Army with some new challenges.

As Mockenhaupt reports:

Since the end of the draft, more than 30 years ago, this is the first time the all-volunteer military has faced sustained combat, and the demands on its human and material resources have been heavy and relentless. At the same time, a relatively prosperous economy and certain larger societal changes have made it harder for the Army to meet its recruiting goals. As Lieutenant General Michael Rochelle, the Army’s deputy chief of staff, testified to Congress in February, the confluence of challenges in recruiting, training, and retaining soldiers is “unparalleled in the history of the volunteer force.”

The challenge:

[T]he Army doesn’t have the luxury of selectivity in filling its expanded rolls. It needs 80,000 new soldiers this year and must find them in a populace that is in many ways less willing and less able to serve than earlier generations were. Young people are fatter and weaker. They eat more junk food, watch more television, play more video games, and exercise less. They are more individualistic and less inclined to join the military. And with the unemployment rate hovering near historic lows, they have other choices.

Today’s soldier must be an information-processing machine, a diplomat, and a lethal instrument of national power. As Mockenhaupt explains, these soldiers face a complex combat environment where, as in Iraq, the soldier must be able to know “when to shake a hand and when to shoot someone dead.”

But the Army has to recruit from the generation of young Americans it faces, not the recruiting pool it might dream to have. In order to meet recruiting goals (80,000 new recruits each year for the Army alone), standards have been lowered, expectations have been altered, and basic training has been transformed.

Consider that in age group 17-24, 7 of 10 young men are ineligible for military service — that's 70 percent. As Mockenhaupt explains, "More than half the members of this youth cohort are disqualified for moral, mental, or medical reasons." These range from run-ins with the law, psychiatric diagnosis, drug problems, and medical issues to gang-related or extremist tattoos.

Mockenhaupt then introduces his readers to Colonel Kevin Shwedo, the director of operations for the Army's Accessions Command within the Training and Doctrine Command, or TRADOC. This sets up the most fascinating single paragraph in the article:

At the same time, Shwedo sees today's recruits as the product of a society that can't quite figure out how to raise its children. "Most kids coming into the Army today have never worn leather shoes in their life unless it said Nike, Adidas, or Timberland. They've never run two miles consecutively in their life, and for the most part they hadn't had an adult tell them 'no' and mean it. That's bizarre," he says. "Our society says you can't count in a soccer match, because you might hurt somebody's feelings. Every kid is going to get a trophy, whether or not you ever went to practice or ever won a game." But these societal shortcomings can be leveraged in the training environment, Shwedo says. "If you go up and do something as simple as slap a soldier on the back and tell them they are doing a good job, you are giving them the recognition that society hasn't given them besides those cheap trophies."

In that single paragraph, Mockenhaupt gives us a portrait of a generation in trouble — a generation of young men who were largely unparented. Consider this one telling sentence: "They've never run two miles consecutively in their life, and for the most part they hadn't had an adult tell them 'no' and mean it." They haven't had an adult tell them 'no' and mean it. That goes a long way toward explaining the culture around us.

The Army's goal:

For all the evolution in military tactics, weaponry, and organizational structure, the basic aim of military training — producing strong, disciplined soldiers, skilled with their weapons — remains constant, and the core methods are simple. You must look like everyone else. You must act like everyone else. You must perform like everyone else. If you don't, you will be punished. Or worse, the group will suffer for your mistakes. To instill this obedience, the Army taps into young people's basic desire for acceptance, and their abhorrence at being singled out for punishment or critique.

Finally:

The Army's problem, however, is really just the nation's problem writ small. The number of Americans serving in the military has steadily shrunk from more than 1 in 10 during World War II to fewer than 1 in 100 today. The all-volunteer military has allowed most Americans to distance themselves from national service, forcing the Army in particular to work harder and spend more to get the people it needs. As former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said in another context, "You go to war with the Army you have. They're not the Army you might want or wish to have at a later time."

Until more Americans are more willing, more able, or perhaps more compelled to serve, the Army must maintain an effective all-volunteer force with the people it has and the limited number of additional people it can recruit. And that larger conundrum is beyond the power of any generals, captains, or drill sergeants to solve.

The focus of Mockenhaupt's article is young men and what they represent as a new challenge to the Army. The article is an incredible piece of cultural insight and analysis, and it should spark thousands of worthy conversations among parents, pastors, youth ministers, and others concerned with today's boys and young men.

The emergence of a generation of boys and young men who have never been told 'no' by an adult who meant it, who include a large percentage who had no father in the home, who were put on Ritalin instead of taught and disciplined, tells us a great deal about ourselves as a society.

The Army's challenge is to transform several thousand young men from this generation each year, turning them into

soldiers. The future of the nation, to a significant degree, rides on those young men. The Army faces new and daunting challenges in the recruitment and training of these young men. As Mockenhaupt makes clear, thousands of these young recruits and soldiers go on to make their nation proud. Clearly, the Army is doing something right.

How about the church? How is the Church faring in its own challenge to reach this generation of young men — the same generation described by Colonel Shwedo above? Are we reaching the boys and young men in our own churches? Are we seeing them transformed from boys into men, from followers into leaders, from undisciplined young males into faithful disciples of Jesus?

If anything, our challenge is greater than that faced by the Army. Beyond that, the stakes are even higher for the church than for the military. The church needs more than a few good men. What are we waiting for?

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