

Commentary

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Military recruiters know their targets well

*For a soldier, he leads a very fine life,
And he always is blessed with a
charming young wife,
And he pays all his debts without
sorrow or strife,*

*And he always lives pleasant and
charmin'.*

*Says Arthur, I wouldn't be proud of
your clothes,*

*For you've only the lend of them, as I
suppose,*

*But you dare not change them one
night, for you know*

*If you do, you'll be flogged in the
morning.*

*And we have no desire to take your
advance,*

*All hazards and dangers we barter on
chance,*

*For you'd have no scruples for to send
us to France,*

*Where we would get shot without
warning.*

The traditional Irish folk song "Arthur McBride" was made popular again by Bob Dylan in 1992. In it, the young hero refutes and resists a military recruiter's false promises.



In mid-19th-century Ireland, recruiting sergeants preyed upon poor Irish boys, promising them adventure, honor, fine clothes and romance instead of potato-famine des-

titution. Poverty and ignorance have always been the military recruiter's best friends.

Irish recruits had to serve as battlefield fodder in the British army for eight pence a day. They were subject to cruel discipline, receiving 25 to 1,500 lashes with a cat-o-nine-tails for offenses like changing out of their uniforms. Still for many, military life was better than starvation.

Recruiters nowadays use the same techniques, but with a new sophistication. The hard sell, and the gaps between promises and realities are still there. And our national economic policies ensure a steady supply of young men for whom the military is the main route out of poverty.

So long as that supply line exists, disapproval of our foreign wars will never reach the intensity of the Vietnam War period. Back then, even wealthy young men such as our current president had their lives affected by the universal draft.

American-Statesman reader Vic Blackburn (1LT, 82nd Airborne Division, 1968-1970) recently reminded me of Col. David Hackworth's views on this subject: "Most recruits in the All Volunteer Force come from non-vocal, working-class families — a disproportionate number from the poor and from minority groups — while more privileged Americans are conspicuous by their absence." Soldiers drawn from a universal draft "keep all our citizens more closely involved and invested; they are our bottom-line deterrent to war."

While most parents of teenagers worry about sex, drugs, alcohol and music, parents in certain neighborhoods and school districts also worry about military recruiters.

Marguerite Jones does. She called me about the sleek, \$2 million, 18-wheeler military Cinema Van that pulled up outside Travis High School around Veteran's Day. In a scene resembling playground drug-pushing, her son William and his freshman peers were lured on board and offered free access to the most sophisticated high-tech battle-simulation computer games. All they had to do was give the recruiters their personal information. The kids were told by their school that they had to sign up to get credit for PE class.

Meanwhile, the recruiters said they needed the information to prove to their superiors that they had been doing their jobs. Indeed.

The U.S. Army-sponsored game "America's Army" and Kuma Reality Games use military battle simulation and retired military consultants to transport their targeted audience of 12- to 15-year-olds right into the Battle of Fallujah, Operation Anaconda and Uday and Qusay's Last Stand. These games are exciting and ultra-realistic, except in representing the real finality if the American soldier avatar should get himself killed or severely wounded.

At a recent conference I attended, a video-game expert spoke of playing the

Battle of Fallujah on-line while watching Marines on CNN do battle on the exact same streets. The video game Full Spectrum Warrior asks youths, "Do you think you have what it takes to become a nationally renowned squad leader?" It also touts the fact that it is based on a game commissioned by the U.S. Army.

The Web sites that offer such games for a \$9.99 monthly fee have direct links to military recruiting Web sites. Imagine the lure of the plush van and sophisticated equipment for kids from homes that cannot afford computers.

Students in targeted schools are further invited to join Junior ROTC. Austin has Air Force Junior ROTC at Reagan, Akins, Westwood, Bowie and McNeil high schools. The Army Junior ROTC Web site calls its version a "Character and Leadership Development Program." We might wonder why other Austin high schools or suburban schools such as Westlake High don't need to develop these same civic virtues.

Further preying upon teen-age insecurity and parental anxiety about their children's future, the military has devised the Delayed Entry Program. Seventeen-year-olds can sign up for military service, ostensibly to gain credit towards higher rank in the year or more before graduation and basic training. There are a number of specified reasons that legally permit these teen-agers later to opt out, but recruiters have been known to misrepresent and pressure reluctant graduates or non-graduates into "living up to their commitment."

Military recruiting then starts with underprivileged 12-year-olds and never lets up. It is supported by money-making video-game manufacturers and schools that are obliged to allow recruiters access to students and student information or lose funding under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

In my last column, I proposed that stop-loss orders and veteran call-backs, while perfectly lawful, were immoral. Blackburn disagrees. He calls them and current recruiting practices criminal. What do you think?

Palaima teaches classics and war and violence studies at the University of Texas at Austin.