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Stupid Soldiers: Central to the Left's Worldview

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John Kerry's comment to college students in California that without education, "you get stuck in Iraq" was not really a joke, botched or otherwise, but neither is the furor over the Senator's comment entirely fair. This line of thinking did not begin with Senator Kerry, and the sentiment is not just a one-time gaffe made by a single individual. Rather, Kerry's slip-up reveals a cornerstone of the Left's worldview: that soldiers are stupid.

Although rarely expressed so boldly, liberals' beliefs that young soldiers are kids, not adults, and victims instead of volunteers has been apparent for decades. Rather than acknowledge that the hundreds of thousands of American adults who enlist are intelligent, and intelligently *choose* to serve as warriors, the Left has repeatedly characterized the uniformed service as a burden foisted on the less fortunate and less intelligent.

In a 2002 *New York Times* editorial, Representative Charles Rangel (D-NY) asserted that a "disproportionate number of the poor and members of minority groups make up the enlisted ranks of the military, while most privileged Americans are underrepresented or absent." (By the numbers, his characterization is outdated by at least three decades.)

The stupid-victim-soldier stereotype was given a boost in 2004 by what turned out to be the highest-grossing documentary ever made, Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*:

Where would [the military] find the new recruits? They would find them all across

America in the places that had been destroyed by the economy. Places where one of the only jobs available was to join the Army.

They [the two Marine recruiters] decided not to go to the wealthier Genesee Valley Mall in the suburbs. They have a hard time recruiting young people there.

Moore goes on to paint the recruiters as conniving and young potential enlistees as dupes. Since then, these stereotypes have been repeatedly echoed around the mainstream media:

- ***New York Daily News*, November 8, 2005:** "Youth from low-income areas are far more likely to end up in the military."¹
- ***Washington Post*, November 4, 2005 (page A-1):** "[T]he military is leaning heavily for recruits on economically depressed, rural areas where youths' need for jobs may outweigh the risks of going to war."²
- ***Los Angeles Times*, September 24, 2005:** "The [GAO] report appears to support the contention that service in the military reserves is most attractive to young men living in

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low- or medium-income families in rural communities.”³

- ***New York Times*, August 18, 2005:** “Very few” of the soldiers fighting in Iraq “are coming from the privileged economic classes.”⁴

In fact, the opposite is true. A recent demographic study by this author, published three days before Senator Kerry’s gaffe, reviews the data on all enlistees, not just a sub-sample. The average American enlistee is more educated—not less—than the average young civilian. Wartime recruits also come from wealthier neighborhoods than their civilian counterparts, on average. And the force has been trending towards wealthier troops and smarter troops since the war in Iraq began in 2003.

The Facts About Today’s Soldiers⁵

- The average reading level of new soldiers is roughly a full grade level higher than their civilian peers’.
- Enlistees’ high school graduation rate was 97 percent in 2003, 2004, and 2005. The civilian graduation rate is seventeen percentage points lower.
- The wealthiest 40 percent of neighborhoods in America are the home of 45.6 percent of 2005 enlistees. For every two U.S. recruits from the poorest neighborhoods, three come from the richest.

- There is no statistical evidence to support the claim that minorities are being targeted or exploited for military service. The 100 zip codes with the highest proportions of African-Americans were actually under-represented among military enlistees in 2005.
- Every U.S. military recruit of the last 33 years has been a volunteer.

Antiwar criticism has morphed into a patronizing attitude toward GIs, by way of questioning the quality of the men and women who volunteer to serve. Perhaps it is easier for the antiwar Left to believe that soldiers are unintelligent than to believe that they are taking risks willingly because they actually believe in the war’s purpose.

The good news is that many Democrats were quick to condemn Kerry’s statement and call for an apology. But righting this wrong requires more than an apology for a one-time slip. At issue is a core belief that sorely needs to be corrected because it is intertwined with weighty policy issues.

The fundamental irony is that so many elites who are eager to cut and run from Iraq stand in clear contrast to the tens of thousands of young adults who are joining the fight, understand the stakes, and want to win.

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1. Juan Gonzalez, “Racial divide evident in military,” *New York Daily News*, November 8, 2005.
2. Ann Scott Tyson, “Youths in Rural U.S. Are Drawn to Military,” *The Washington Post*, November 4, 2005, p. A1.
3. Tony Perry, “Whites Account for Most of Military’s Fatalities,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 24, 2005, p. A-9.
4. Bob Herbert, “Blood Runs Red, Not Blue,” *The New York Times*, August 18, 2005.
5. See Tim Kane, Ph.D., “Who Are the Recruits? The Demographic Characteristics of U.S. Military Enlistment, 2003–2005,” Heritage Foundation Center for Data Analysis Report No. 06-09, October 27, 2006, at www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/cda06-09.cfm.