



Gone are the days of the all-American army hero. These days, the US military is more like a sanctuary for racists, gang members and the chronically unfit.

The three most common barriers for potential recruits were failure to graduate high school, a criminal record and physical fitness issues, including obesity. The criminal record had been dealt with by "moral waivers" and the obesity problem by "medical waivers", but dropping the standards on educational attainment would not be so easy without seriously affecting operational readiness. There was a way for non-graduates to get into the military, however: the general equivalency degree, or GED, which can afford recruits a waiver if they score well enough on the military's entrance exam. The army accepts about 15% of recruits without a high school diploma if they have a GED. Alive to this loophole, the military instituted another program in 2008, the so-called GED Plus, to give more of America's youth the requisite qualifications they needed to go and fight. It opened its first prep school for the purpose, targeted at tough, inner-city areas.

The magnitude of the problem within the military is hard to quantify. The military does not track extremists as a discrete category, coupling them with gang members, and those in the neo-Nazi movement claim different numbers. The National Socialist Movement claimed 190 of its members are inside. White Revolution claimed 12. In white supremacist incidents from 2001 to 2008, the FBI identified 203 veterans. Because the FBI focused only on reported cases, its numbers don't include the many extremist soldiers who have managed to stay off the radar. But its report does pinpoint why the white supremacist movements seek to recruit veterans – they "may exploit their accesses to restricted areas and intelligence or apply specialised training in weapons, tactics, and organisational skills to benefit the extremist movement". The report found that two army privates in the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg had attempted in 2007 to sell stolen property from the military – including ballistic vests, a combat helmet, and pain medications such as morphine – to an undercover FBI agent they believed was involved with the white supremacist movement (they were convicted and sentenced to six years in prison). It also found multiple examples of white supremacist recruitment among active military personnel, including a period in 2003 when six active-duty soldiers at Fort Riley were found to be members of the neo-Nazi group Aryan Nations, working to recruit their army colleagues and even serving as the Aryan Nations' point of contact for the State of Kansas.

The modern US army: unfit for service?

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