

Retired Military as Teachers

By Bill Hobby

Within the next few years, hundreds of thousands of highly trained men and women will be mustered out of the armed forces.

Of the 750,000 soon-to-be veterans who will leave military service over the next five years, about 150,000 are commissioned, warrant, and senior non-commissioned officers. They are trained in vital technical skills and are natural leaders.

Though well qualified, many will not be able to find jobs that use those skills. Typically they will have spent one quarter of their military careers as students or instructors in their specialties. Many of these veterans will be men, many of them minorities.

They are in their forties and fifties, with twenty-something productive years ahead of them. The nation has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in their professional training. In short, they are fine prospective high-school teachers.

With the proper incentives, maybe 75,000 might become teachers.

That many new teachers would not only be readily absorbed in the next five years, but welcomed into the classroom. About 90,000 potential new teachers a year now graduate from colleges of education. School districts hire over 175,000 new teachers a year. The deficit is filled by former teachers returning to the classroom, teachers who have never taught despite being qualified to do so, and new teachers from alternative certification programs.

More than one million new teachers will be needed in the next five years. Colleges of education will provide about half a million. Well-qualified veterans can help fill the gap.

With the growing dissatisfaction over the teaching profession and the pressure to find new sources of teachers, Texas and many other states have already begun qualifying teachers in non-traditional ways. These "non-traditional" teachers have done just as well as, or better than, education graduates on certification tests and on the job.

About 28 states now have such programs. These programs are an integral part of the President Bush's "America 2000" program for education. In his recent report to Congress the President said that "The solution to the problem of attracting talented teachers is not to regulate the industry further but to open it up to the competitive process and to reduce certification requirements in ways that do not threaten but instead encourage excellence in teaching."

The inclusion of veterans in the President's solution for the teacher shortage makes sense.

Can people who have not graduated from college teach in high school? A college degree indicates maturity and knowledge. So does ten or so years of service in the armed forces. I have never known a Chief Petty Officer who could not teach a high-school class. For centuries, non-coms have spent most of their time educating adolescent boys.

Teacher programs don't have to take years. College graduates in the TEACH AMERICA program enter inner-city classrooms after three months of training.

Could not mature veterans with 10-20 years of military service be trained in the same length of time? Of course. They could be teaching in the classroom in a matter of months.

The success of this program will be determined by the quality of the soon-to-be veterans willing to enter it. The quality will be determined by the incentives offered, most logically through the military retirement system.

Veterans leaving the service have pension benefits ranging from none for those with less than 20 years service, to 50-75 percent of final pay for those with 20-30 years of service and 75 percent for those with more than 30 years of service. The pensions, of course, are in addition to medical benefits of enormous value.

Under this approach, a qualified veteran who becomes a teacher would earn military retirement credit in the classroom. The credit could be either on a year-for-year basis or proportional. The cost of the additional benefit would be deferred until retirement of the teacher-veteran, who would also earn credit in the individual state's teacher retirement system.

For instance, a veteran with 15 years of service would need five more years to qualify for the 20-year retirement option.

A more costly alternative would be to offer the 15-year veteran a flat 40% pension (2.5% per year) for so long as the veteran teaches. The enhanced pension (50%) would be payable at the completion of five years in the classroom. This relatively small pension would compensate for the low entry-level pay of teachers.

The program which would result from this effort would involve the coordination of federal, state, and local efforts.

Specific actions would include the promotion of the program within the military, modification of the retirement system, creation of state programs of alternative certification, mobilization of the colleges and universities, and involvement of school districts in need of trained personnel.

Employing trained military personnel at or nearing retirement is a logical way to address several of our problems. The reduction of the armed forces, the need for more teachers, and the stagnation of the economy present a unique opportunity for the nation.

Written in 1991.