

# **Truth and Youth: the First Victims of War**

## **Military Mis-information and the Responsibility of Libraries**

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*In times of war* information is often distorted to serve the interests of those in power. For this reason, the value of the library is perhaps most strongly felt in wartime. It is important that there be a way for ordinary people to assess the claims made by the government and the often-compliant mass media. The internet is one source for such information but for in-depth research libraries are unparalleled. When information is restricted or distorted, everyone benefits from access to libraries. However, the need for independent and objective information is greatest for those whose lives are at stake —particularly young people at risk of being recruited. It is no exaggeration to say that for low-income youth, access to accurate information is literally a life-and-death issue.

If information as a whole is distorted in wartime nowhere is this more blatant than in military recruitment campaigns. Military recruiters are notorious for making attractive offers to young people. These include promises of travel, skill development, money for college and financial security. As various groups, including the American Friends Service Committee and Coalition Against Militarism in Our Schools (2005), have pointed out, these promises do not always materialize. The belief that military service will result in money for college motivates many young recruits. But as Ensign (n.d.) notes, "Among recruits who sign up for the Montgomery GI Bill, 65% receive no money for college, and only 15% ever receive a college degree."

One might think that public schools would provide a forum for young people to consider the implications of military service. Unfortunately this is not usually the case. Indeed, young people are particularly vulnerable to military recruitment while at school. This is in part a structural problem. The development of North American public education was heavily influenced by military models in Europe. Some have argued that historically state schools served a military purpose. Even today military values such as unquestioning submission to authority and regimented routine are reflected in school rhetoric (Hern 2003). Schools, through their structure and some of their core principles, reflect a military mentality and send the unspoken message that a military model is normal and right.

But the problem goes further still. Military recruiters have access to North American schools, both indirectly through posters and other materials, and directly through the presence of military personnel on campus. The No Child Left Behind Act gives military recruiters easy access to American high school students. As Ayers (2006) notes, the Act "mandates that military recruiters have the same access to students as colleges. The bill also requires schools to turn over students' addresses and home phone numbers to the military unless parents expressly opt out." Public schools could be providing students with the intellectual tools to access the claims of military recruiters. Educational institutions could help develop students' resistance by encouraging inquiry and

debate. Instead, though, schools have become closely integrated with military programs and now play a essential role in recruitment campaigns. For this reason schools are not a reliable source of objective information about the military.

Low-income students, lacking information about the options available to them, are easily lured into military service. Once there they can discover that the promises they received were false and that the information they were provided was not accurate. In this context, where schools often implicitly and explicitly support the military, how can students be expected to make an informed choice? Where can youth go for objective information about military service and about the career and educational options available to them?

Libraries could play an important role in supporting the educational and informational needs of potential recruits. As mentioned earlier, a desire for further education motivates many of those who enlist. Alvin Johnson's book *The Public Library: A People's University* (1938), makes an argument that is still relevant today. He urges that we "develop the public library into a permanent centre of adult education, informally, a people's university." Johnson believes that libraries have much to offer in technical as well as academic subjects. He suggests that libraries play an important role in the development of career-related skills: "I do not know of any quantitative data on the number of persons who have been helped over what might have been grave obstacles to a continuing useful career. But everywhere one encounters instances of men [sic] who owe their positions or promotions to the public library" (Johnson 1938). Low-income youth may have limited educational opportunities. The library, as Johnson suggested almost 70 years ago, could be a centre for advanced education accessible to all.

Those at risk of recruitment have a need for accurate, objective information. The information needs of this group are varied and might include:

- what military service involves
- rights and legal advice
- analysis of promises made by recruiters
- youth and war resisters' organizations
- employment and education opportunities.

Ideally, libraries could support the needs of low-income youth in three ways: by advancing their education, by helping with the development of career-related skills, and by providing access to relevant information. Before that can happen though, libraries will have to change. In order to effectively support this group, libraries should first publicize the available services in a way that is meaningful to youth. Low-income youth are not typical library users and those who do venture in should be treated with sensitivity (by considering for example, what media are most accessible, preferred languages and the approachability of library staff). Military recruitment campaigns are supported by lavish budgets. Libraries cannot possibly compete. But, given their resources, libraries could play a major role in countering military misinformation.

## Resources

American Friends Service Committee National Youth and Militarism Program *Do You Know Enough to Enlist?* (pamphlet), 2005.

Ayers, William "Heart and Mind: Military Recruitment and the High School Battlefield"

*Phi Delta Kappan* Ap. 2006 Vol 87 Issue 8 pp594-599.  
Coalition Against Militarism in Our Schools *Demilitarizing Schools and Presenting Alternatives* (pamphlet), 2005.  
Common Dreams [www.commondreams.org](http://www.commondreams.org).  
Ensign, Todd in *The New Yorkers' Guide to Military Recruitment in the Five Boroughs* <http://www.counterrecruitmentguide.org/military.php>.  
Hern, Matt *Field Day* New Star Books, 2003.  
Johnson, Alvin *The Public Library: The People's University* American Association for Adult Education, 1938.