

# Recruit the Selfish

## Stressing Individual Opportunity in Army Recruiting

### January 2017 Award Winner NCO Writing Excellence Program

By Staff Sgt. Oren Hammerquist

The Army should reconsider its target market and implement a campaign emphasizing mutual benefits for both the Army and the recruit. Since its formation, the Army has relied on one medium for Army recruitment above all others: the recruiting poster. With the recent retirement of “Army Strong,” a partially successful marketing strategy, the Army switches to a more dynamic image. This offers the Army a chance to brand itself considering sweeping changes to Army policy (Army University, Blended Retirement Program, etc.).

As this paper looks back at historical campaigns, it will be helpful to divide recruiting posters into categories to aid understanding of the basic impetus behind the associated campaign. Each category is discussed in detail as they arise below. Recruiting posters fall generally into one of three categories: patriotism, negotiation, and functionalism. Under patriotism, you could further divide posters into symbolized, vengeful, or guilty.

Negotiation divides loosely into beneficial, tailorable, and civilian. Functionalism applies best to more recent marketing techniques such as television spots, recruiting videos, and various innovative (and not always successful) ideas. However, there is an element of functionalism in posters focusing either on general Soldiering or specific Soldiering.

After looking briefly at historical examples, this paper will consider how best to market the Army in the current landscape. The Army seems poised to move away from slogans and posters in the coming decade. The focus must therefore be on branding rather than marketing in the traditional sense. The most efficient means may be to expand civic involvement rather than increase sales pitches.

### Historical Perspectives

Recruiting posters have been a part of Army and civilian culture since the inception of the Army. What may be the first American military recruiting poster seems like a road map to the next 240 years of marketing. The recruiting poster for the Continental Army bears the words “TAKE NOTICE” boldly in the middle.<sup>1</sup> We see elements of symbolized patriotism in the prominence of the words “liberties” and “independence” just above center. Likewise, two stars, already becoming key patriotic symbols, lay below center.

The poster uses guilty patriotism by calling to “brave, healthy, able bodied” young men. This implies any reader not interested in joining may not be one of the three. Though this particular poster does not use vengeful patriotism openly, other campaigns of the time likened the current state of governance by England to slavery.<sup>2</sup>

The Continental Army poster clearly uses beneficial negotiation techniques by clearly listing the pay (twelve whole dollars per year), provided food and uniforms, and opportunity to travel. Though the Continental Army was not broadly tailorable by job (Soldiers had a choice of infantry or artillery), this poster clearly uses civilian negotiation by listing benefits after military service.

Finally, we see functionalism at play prominently on this early poster. The idea of specific functionalism did not exist in the Army then, or was at least highly limited; the MOS is a modern military item. This poster does show general functionalism by prominently displaying Soldiers loading and firing assigned weapons.

Though the nature of these messages changed over the decades and centuries, this poster succinctly explains all strategies used to the present day. Even as we move away from posters and slogans as an Army, these three areas will dominate our image. Later posters tend to be more focused as this paper explains below.

**Recruiting for World Wars.** Raising an all-volunteer force in the millions was impossible. Still, for obvious reasons, a volunteer is Soldier is better than a draftee when possible. Even with widespread drafts, the Army and its sister services advertised heavily for volunteers. With a few exceptions, recruiting posters in this era relied heavily on patriotism.

The most well-known Army recruiting poster passed beyond marketing and into popular culture: Uncle Sam looking directly into the viewer’s eyes and issuing a challenge. This image originated in World War I, but is usually associated with WWII recruiting efforts.<sup>3</sup> Similar is the well-known image of Uncle Sam with hat and jacket removed, sleeves rolled up, and flexing muscular arms as he marches forward for a brawl—a bald eagle surging forward in attack at his shoulder—while the poster orders “Defend Your Country.”<sup>4</sup> These two images are pure symbolic patriotism. Uncle Sam is clad always in stars and stripes. In a time with a clearly defined enemy in a force-on-force battle, these images work well.

The Army often used more varied posters to spur recruiting especially during WWI. One well-known poster begs Irishmen to “Avenge the Lusitania,” which is an example of vengeful patriotism. Another poster offered adventure and travel for artillerymen (specific functionalism and beneficial negotiation). Despite these examples, patriotism dominated this era.



Vietnam. Modern warfare tends toward more asymmetrical conflicts. Strategic planners still look toward Vietnam for lessons learned—good and bad—and those wishing to portray the Army image should also consider lessons learned here as well. Recruiting posters during Vietnam tend to rely heavily on general functionalism as an image. Images of Soldiers with weapon in hand assaulting an enemy dominate this era. In hindsight, this probably was not the best marketing strategy during a largely unpopular war. Images of Soldiers fighting likely exacerbated the public distaste for this conflict caused by unfavorable media coverage. However, patriotic images may not have worked well during this period due to a lack of a clear enemy in the minds of many Americans.

**Navy Beats Army?** In many ways, the Navy lead the way in marketing during World War II and beyond. WWII posters for Navy carry more vengeful patriotism with messages such as “Smack the Japs.” The Navy also displayed tailorable negotiation by offering specific jobs in posters during WWI and WWII—submariners, machinists, electricians, etc. Following WWII, the Navy immediately began advertising for jobs in electronics while the Army began to advertise general Soldiering skills.

Most notable is the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) program. While posters targeted at men often displayed ten-inch guns, posters targeted at women showed women in dress uniforms and clearly stated compensation. These are examples of general functionalism and beneficial negotiation.

**Making it Look Good.** Historically, the Marines are among the most successful meeting recruiting goals. One obvious reason is the relative size of the Marine Corps versus the Army. The Marine Corps also gives less focus historically to the career Marine than the Army (with the pension program for example). Marine recruiting posters and advertisements all seem to have one thing in common: the dress uniform. This creates an easily recognizable symbol across decades but also draws attention away from the dangers of combat. The Marine Corps places a much greater percentage of its members into combat positions than the Army and has far fewer job opportunities. The recruiting success of the Marine Corps illustrates the value of symbols and minimalizing dangers to civilians.

**Be All You Can Be.** Many older Soldiers grew up hearing this popular slogan, which replaced the unsuccessful and unpopular “This is the Army” campaign of the late 1970’s. The latter stemmed from an ill-conceived attempt to make the Army more honest and whimsical. Though taglines such as “In Europe you’re a Soldier 24 hours a day, but the rest of your time is your own”<sup>5</sup> enjoyed ironic popularity, they did little to spur recruitment.

“Be All You Can Be” is an excellent example of negotiation. This campaign led potential recruits to consider what benefits they may gain by joining the military. An increased focus on technology also caused many to view the Army outside of the framework of the Korean and Vietnam wars.<sup>6</sup>

Just as important to consider is when the campaign enjoyed success. Though it buoyed recruitment through Desert Storm, it also fared well in the height of the Cold War. Like the Vietnam War, this conflict—or perhaps the lack of conflict—was characterized by power structures and issues difficult for civilians to understand. The success of “Be All You Can Be” suggests marketing campaigns should encourage recruits conduct a cost-benefit analysis for military service.

**An Army of One.** Despite being unpopular with veterans, this slogan launched in the early 2000’s enjoyed early success.<sup>7</sup> By 2005, the Army spent more on marketing than all other services (not including Coast Guard) combined.<sup>8</sup> Despite these expenditures, the Army consistently missed recruiting goals. In fact, the Army showed zero growth from 2003-2004.<sup>9</sup> This caused serious problems for an Army fighting a war on two fronts. It is likely that the rising death toll in Iraq and Afghanistan seriously damaged the Army image during this time; the other services spent less and did not experience the same recruiting shortages including the Marine Corps (also posting heavy combat losses).<sup>10</sup> “Army of One” unfortunately involved heavy use of images showing general functionalism; Soldiers in combat uniforms likely had an unfavorable juxtaposition with the rising death toll.

The early popularity of “Army of One” is likely skewed by historical events. “Army of One” launched close to the September 11th attacks. This devastating attack on American soil prompted many to roll up their sleeves and “Defend Your Country” regardless of ad campaigns. Relaxed enlistment standards also skewed statistics of the unpopular slogan.

One indicator of skewed results is the decline in minority enlistments. From 1999-2004 (roughly coinciding with the launch of “Army of One”), recruitment of minorities dropped more than 10%.<sup>11</sup> Studies, focusing on Navy recruitment, found that family opinion of military service played an important role in the decision to join, and that Hispanics were among the most heavily affected groups.<sup>12</sup> Marketing began to target minorities, but the current slogan still did not meet requirements.

**Army Strong.** “Army Strong” enjoyed great popularity with veterans. Unfortunately, research showed civilians did not share this enthusiasm. Though the tagline changed, the images associated with the project varied only in an increase in minority representation. The posters still bore images of Soldiers in combat uniforms carrying out combat missions or training. The slogan lasted about ten years and performed well, but research eventually showed that civilians were apathetic to the message. “Army Strong” was retired in 2015. Planners stated they have no intention of replacing it with a new slogan, and intend to focus on a broader, online presence instead.<sup>13</sup>

## Lessons Learned

**Symbols.** Advertising must use symbols of some sort to be effective. During national crises, flags or the stars and stripes are common. Such symbols are easily recognized by civilians and Soldiers alike. The same rule must apply to symbols used outside of crisis eras. “Army of One”

symbols are easily recognized by civilians and soldiers alike. The same rule must apply to symbols used outside of crisis eras. Army of One often used symbols such as Airborne badges, night vision goggles, and body armor. Though Soldiers understood these instinctively, they had little meaning to civilians. Frequent pictures of Soldiers bearing rifles in full-battle rattle also did not play well beside the rising death toll in Afghanistan and Iraq.

**Propaganda.** An internet search for Army recruiting posters often brings the word propaganda alongside images. Though the sites displaying these posters as “propaganda” are often opinionated at best and sometimes skewed towards anti-military sentiment, it is important that we consider if, in fact, Army recruiting is propaganda. Propaganda is the use of symbols—visual or verbal—representing only one side of an issue to convince others to take a specific action on emotional grounds. Simply put, stamping a label of propaganda on recruiting posters is often propaganda itself.

Most advertising uses propaganda to some extent, and the Army is no different. Attempts to completely remove this resulted in the often comically inept strategies of “This Is the Army.” Technically, posters with tattered American flags with slogans such as “Avenge Pearl Harbor” or recruiting based on September 11th are propaganda, but most would agree that given the time this is often appropriate.

Occasionally, military posters are inappropriate propaganda in hindsight. One example is a WWI poster featuring a Gorilla wearing a German helmet and carrying a bloody club with the German word Kultur written across it. In the other arm, he carries a swooning white woman naked to the waist. Across the top are the words “Destroy this mad brute.”<sup>14</sup> Though undoubtedly considered appropriate at the time, this bears images that may not cast the Army in the best light for future generations.

The success of “Be All You Can Be” suggests that though propaganda often works well during times of crisis, it is not the best practice for long term recruitment. The most successful campaigns tend towards negotiation.

**Cost-Benefit Analysis.** Marketing campaigns for the US Army don’t seek to recruit those coming from military families who plan to join the military from a young age. Rather, the Army must market to those who are undecided or even initially uninterested in military service. The zero growth in the military between 2003-2004 stemmed from the fact that the cost outweighed presented benefits at the time. People are by nature selfish, and successful Army marketing must present a wide variety of personal benefits to military service.

**Army University.** Free college has been a motivator for military service since the inception of the GI Bill. Rising costs of higher education benefit recruitment, and an emphasis on college benefits helps gain support for service from family members. With the planned accreditation of Army University, recruiting efforts might benefit most from open marketing of free college opportunities for service.

**Quality.** In 2014, the USAREC Commander MG Batschelet said, “The quality of people willing to serve has been declining rapidly.”<sup>15</sup> Up to 80% of walk-in recruits are turned away as ineligible.<sup>16</sup> Some are ineligible due to legal or medical concerns, but the primary reason for rejection is obesity. MG Batschelet called the growing obesity epidemic in America “a national security issue.”<sup>17</sup>

The issues that affect military recruitment affect the quality and health of our citizens at large. Children may “mature out” of petty theft, drug use, or other juvenile delinquencies, but these childhood transgressions may still affect that potential recruit’s ability to get a security clearance. This makes many of the most critical jobs harder to fill. Likewise, healthy eating habits and regular exercise from an early age benefits the country, the Army, and the individual.

When considering approaches to this problem, it is important that campaigns highlight real physical benefit to individuals of good citizenship and good health without seeing to create a shadow Army of future recruits. Aside from raising obvious parental and political concerns, such a formation would draw too many parallels to “Hitler’s Youth.” Properly executed campaigns would garner more support from parents.

**Branding.** As marketing of the Army brand moves away from catchphrases and posters, it is time to consider how the Army is branded. Already, a group of several hundred retired Generals and Admirals have formed an organization dedicated to exactly the citizenship and health issues above. This organization is Mission: Readiness. Army investment in this program (monetary or personnel), followed by a plug saying “Paid for by the US Army,” is one way to unobtrusively publicize the Army brand while addressing quality concerns for future recruits.

The Army should brand also itself as an organization dedicated to fitness. Campaigns for Soldier athletes enjoyed success during both world wars both in America and Allied countries.<sup>18</sup> As the Army attempts to reorganize as a university, an increased and more public emphasis on sports is a logical step. This may further address the intent of the new Blended Retirement Program, which moves the Army away from a career-based organization to an organization more akin to the Marines (who have better recruiting success for focus on temporary rather than career service<sup>19</sup>).

The Army should expand the Soldier for Life (SFL) program in both directions and cooperate with organizations with similar goals. SFL instructors could give financial planning classes in High Schools, explain education options to young people, or help offer free career planning advice. Instructors need not take any action to recruit at these seminars; such seminars would also be more likely to grow support from family for the decision to join the Army. More public partnerships with organizations such as Mission: Readiness, American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, or even Boy Scouts of America—perhaps through increased volunteer involvement or unit partnerships—offers cheap and partnerships with the opportunity for great advantage.

Finally, the Army should take part in public campaigns such as Red Ribbon Week, anti-bullying campaigns (with a tagline that almost writes itself), or prevention programs for sexual assault and domestic violence. Many Army programs share aims and methods with civilian programs.

Commanders should consider involving young Soldiers in these efforts to make a greater connection with potential recruits than a commander speaking.

## Conclusion

As the Army retires “Army Strong,” recruiting planners have a unique opportunity to rebrand the Army and rethink marketing plans. The success of “Be All You Can Be” indicates that an emphasis on individual involvement and opportunity is likely to be most successful. Marketers should consider carefully the symbols used in marketing; like the Marine Corps, the Army should increase the prevalence of Soldiers in dress uniform and decrease the appearance of Soldiers in combat uniforms or with equipment when marketing to civilians. Finally, a subtler marketing campaign focusing on improving quality in the recruiting pool may be the best option to improve support for military service by recruits and family members.

**Staff Sgt. Hammerquist** is a 14G (Air Battle Management Systems Operator) Section Sergeant currently assigned to the Air Defense and Airspace Management/Regimental Aviation Element (ADAM/RAE), 2d Cavalry Regiment, Rose Barracks, Germany. Staff Sgt. Hammerquist has an Associate’s Degree in General Studies, a Bachelor of Arts in Criminal Justice, and a Master of Arts in English and Creative Writing.

*Army University Press created the Future Warfare Writing Program to generate ideas about possible complexities of future warfare, as presented in the Army Operating Concept. The views expressed belong to their authors, and do not necessarily represent the official view of The Army Press or any other government institutions or agencies.*

## Endnotes

1. “Military Recruitment Across Time: An Historical Analysis of Recruitment Propaganda.” <http://www.edliberation.org/talkin-bout/camouflaged/recruitment-history>. Camouflaged. Part I. Section E. It is important to note that this reference is highly skewed and unapologetically anti-military.
2. Ibid.
3. “The Most Famous Poster (Memory): American Treasures of the Library of Congress.” The Library of Congress. July 20, 2010. Accessed December 26, 2016. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trm015.html>.
4. Szoldra, Paul. “The 8 most famous US military recruiting posters of World War II.” We Are The Mighty. May 8, 2015. Accessed December 26, 2016. <http://www.wearethemighty.com/articles/world-war-2-recruiting-posters>.
5. Evans, Tom. “All We Could Be: How an Advertising Campaign Helped Remake the Army.” The Campaign for the National Museum of the United States Army. January 20, 2015. Accessed December 26, 2016. <https://armyhistory.org/all-we-could-be-how-an-advertising-campaign-helped-remake-the-army/>.
6. Ibid.
7. Matulich, Erika, Dierdre Dixon, Jacqueline Atkins, Erin Cece, and Stefan Dreschel. “Army of One? Marketing Battle for Recruits.” Journal of Business Cases and Applications 14 (July 2015): 1-9. <http://www.aabri.com/manuscripts/152322.pdf>.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Lilley, Kevin. “Service ditches ‘Army Strong’ for new branding strategy.” Army Times. April 30, 2015. Accessed December 26, 2016. <https://www.armytimes.com/story/military/2015/04/30/army-strong-advertising-recruiting/26586513/>.
14. See note 1.
15. Feeney, Nolan. “Pentagon: 7 in 10 Youths Would Fail to Qualify for Military Service.” Time. June 29, 2014. Accessed December 26, 2016. <http://time.com/2938158/youth-fail-to-qualify-military-service/>.
16. “80% of Military Recruitments Turned Down.” Military.com. May 14, 2014. Accessed December 26, 2016. <http://www.military.com/join-armed-forces/2014/05/14/80-of-military-recruitments-turned-down.html>.
17. Ibid.
18. “World War I Recruiting Posters.” The Ultimate History Project. Accessed December 26, 2016. <http://www.ultimatehistoryproject.com/military-maneuvers-world-war-i-recruiting-posters.html>.
19. See note 5.

