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Uncle Sam really wants usted

By Linda Bilmes

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THE PENTAGON IS facing its most serious manpower challenge since the draft ended in 1973.

The Army, the Army National Guard, the Marines and the Reserves are struggling to meet their recruitment targets. Applications to West Point, the Naval Academy and the Air Force Academy have dropped between 10% and 20%. Recruitment among African Americans ~ who make up nearly one-quarter of active duty forces despite being only 13% of the U.S. population ~ has fallen by 40% in the face of strong community opposition to the Iraq war. New enlistment of women has dropped by 23%.

These shortfalls come despite ever-higher enlistment and retention bonuses and reduced fitness and age standards.

The Pentagon has decided that the solution to the problem lies in one statistic: Latinos make up less than 10% of the active-duty forces, but they comprise 16% of the 18- to 24-year-old U.S. population.

This rapidly growing population is poorer and more likely to be underemployed than the average for the age group and has a lower rate of college attendance than whites or blacks, which ought to make it prime material for recruiters. Latinos already in the military are disproportionately in the low ranks of the Marines and the Army, serving as front-line troops.

The Pentagon has publicly stated that it wants to double the number of Latinos enlisting, and it is focusing hardest on areas with a high Latino population but relatively low enlistment. Calculating what it calls a "production to population" ratio, the Pentagon's top four target markets are Los Angeles, the rest of Southern California, Phoenix and Sacramento.

The military is arming itself to put the right messages in front of its targets. The Army has purchased the best market research, including the "Yankelovich Hispanic Monitor," which divides the Latino population into 12 distinct market segments based on level of "acculturation and life stage," and commissioned Rand Corp. to study barriers to enlistment.

The Yankelovich research found some attitudes that present "recruiting challenges."

For example, two-thirds of Latinos agree with the statement, "People's main responsibility is to themselves and their families, not to making the world a better place," compared with only half of whites. More than double the number of Latinos, compared with whites, felt the need to be "hip and cool" and "to keep up with the latest trends in movies, music and fashion." And 71% were more inclined to purchase things advertised in Spanish ~ up from 55% 10 years ago.

The military's communications plan is based on these findings.

"We search for cultural insights and determine how to leverage Hispanic values and beliefs," said a representative of Cartel Creativo, the San Antonio-based advertising company that has developed the Army's current "Yo Soy el Army" ad campaign.

A key finding was that young Latinos are motivated more by family approval than by money.

Consequently, much of the advertising focuses on convincing mothers and fathers that they can be proud of a child's Army career. Univision, Telemundo and Spanish-language radio are saturated with advertisements for the Army. The Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps is an increasingly common presence in high schools with large Latino populations, thanks in part to the No Child Left Behind Act, which requires schools to grant access and student information to military recruiters (unless parents refuse by notifying the school in writing).

One of the Army's new recruitment programs is the "Hispanic H2 Tour," featuring a customized Hummer, produced by Latino Sports Marketing of San Diego, designed so teenagers can try out interactive video simulations on multiple screens. The H2 tour visits car shows, county fairs, baseball games and other events.

Another tactic has been to dangle the prospect of citizenship. The JROTC produces a "Recruiting Play Book," which advises recruiters that one way to appeal to Latino prospects may be their desire "to apply for citizenship immediately." Shortly before the Iraq war began, President Bush signed an executive order allowing noncitizen permanent residents to serve in the military and to apply for citizenship on a fast-track basis. Since then, about 20,000 noncitizens (mostly Latino) have served in the military and become U.S. citizens. The order also allows noncitizen soldiers killed in combat to be granted posthumous citizenship. This also helps family members of the fallen soldier to obtain citizenship.

The Dream Act, now pending in Congress, would grant permanent residency to the children of illegal immigrants if they graduate from two years of college or serve two years in the military.

The Pentagon has already ordered 40,000 soldiers to stay in Iraq beyond their agreed return dates. With the military stretched so thin, some in Congress and the military are whispering the unthinkable word: "draft."

"I just begin to wonder at what point we can continue to buy a force", said Rep. John M. McHugh (R-N.Y.) at a meeting of the House Armed Services subcommittee on recruiting last month.

Throughout history, nations have sent their poorest to be foot soldiers. In that long, sad tradition, Uncle Sam is now beckoning its most recent immigrants to fight this war so the rest of us don't have to.