



## Fighting for citizenship

Max Boot

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Recently, I happened to read two of the best military memoirs ever published: "Bugles and a Tiger" and "The Road Past Mandalay." Both were written by John Masters, a British officer with a literary flair who joined the Indian army in 1934, participated in one of the last imperial campaigns on the Northwest Frontier, invaded Iraq to overthrow a pro-German dictator in 1941 and then led a commando brigade operating behind Japanese lines in Burma.

His writing is suffused with nostalgia for the regiment in which he served in the 1930s, the Prince of Wales' Own 4th Gurkha Rifles. The Nepalese tribesmen known as Gurkhas have been fighting under the Union Jack since 1815. Masters was rapturous in describing their "straightness, honesty, naturalness, loyalty, courage" — all qualities il-

lustrated in a famous anecdote about a group of Gurkhas who in 1940 were asked to jump out of an airplane.

Only 70 men came forward at first. One hundred were needed. The British officers, crestfallen, "called upon the sacred honor of the regiment and vowed that parachutes never — well, hardly ever — failed to open." Upon hearing this, a lance naik (lance corporal) happily exclaimed, "Oh, we jump with these parachutes, do we? That's different."

And thereupon the entire regiment volunteered.

The British Empire is long gone, but the Gurkhas remain in British service — and in the service of such erstwhile British colonies as India and Singapore. They have continued to distinguish themselves — from

the 1982 Falkland Islands war to the ongoing war in Iraq.

The Gurkhas' glittering record is worth mentioning because we are in the midst of a heated debate over immigration. The crux of the discussion is: To whom, and under what conditions, should we grant American citizenship?

Lost in the uproar has been an idea so meritorious that it should win universal assent: Create a fast track toward citizenship for those willing to serve a stint in the United States armed forces.

The immigration bill passed by the Senate Judiciary Committee, now stalled on the Senate floor, would take a small step in this direction by granting residency to the children of undocumented immigrants who obey the law, graduate from high school and spend two years in either college or the armed forces. I would go further by opening military service not only to immigrants already here but to those who would like to come here.

This would address two critical shortcomings. First, it would make it easier for the U.S. armed forces to fill their ranks with high-quality volunteers. Second, it would increase the armed forces' knowledge of foreign languages and customs.

THE ARMY MISSED its recruiting quotas in fiscal year 2005. This year it has been meeting its goals, but only by raising signing bonuses and lowering standards. There has been an increase in the number of recruits

with criminal convictions, drug use, medical conditions, no high school diploma or low scores on cognitive aptitude tests.

This is a dangerous trend because the profession of arms has never been more mentally or morally demanding. Soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan have to make split-second decisions with major political ramifications. Obviously it would be easier to attract the kind of top-notch soldiers we need if the recruiting pool were expanded from 295 million Americans to 6.5 billion earthlings.

Our current conflicts also require intimate knowledge of the areas where our soldiers operate, because their tasks are often as much diplomatic as military. Recruiting foreigners could go a long way toward filling this critical knowledge deficit.

Many people nevertheless react with revulsion to the idea of enlisting "mercenaries." They wonder if these troops would prove dependable and whether relying on them would hasten our decline and fall.

These are legitimate concerns, but history suggests that they are overblown. Britain, France and other powerful nations got along quite nicely for centuries by enlisting foreign nationals – and still do. (Think of the French Foreign Legion as well as the Gurkhas.) Occasionally this caused problems, as when some Indian troops mutinied in 1857. But there also have been insurrections among soldiers born in the country they serve.

Most foreign troops have been closer to the example of the Gurkhas, loyal in 1857 and thereafter. They may be mercenaries, but Jack

Masters was proud to lead them, and so would any American officer – especially if there were a call for volunteer parachutists.