

The Salt Lake Tribune

Don't like military targeting kids? Opt out of recruiting



BARB GUY

I don't know where I was, maybe a street fair or a farmers market, maybe an art gallery. I signed someone's mailing list, and, a bit concerned that the compiler of the list would sell or share my name, I used my dog's first name with my true last name and address. That way, I reasoned, I'll know if this group passes my address around.

Unfortunately, my attention span isn't that great. By the time Sydney started getting mail, I couldn't remember whose list I'd signed. He's only 8, but my dog is being marketed to like he's a high school student. He gets offers for credit cards, photo shoots, "scholarships" at trade and tech schools, tutoring and, most disturbingly, the U.S. armed forces. It seems he's quite attractive to the Marines, the Army and the Navy.

Sydney's a peaceful dog, a blue-state, blue-dog, blue heeler. He

thinks George Bush ginned up the war in Iraq for less-than-honorable purposes and he wants no part in it.

He loves his country and serves it well by barking at strangers, wearing his license tag and staying in the back yard. He knows there are plenty of ways to pay for college that won't cost him his life. Like the children of nearly every member of the Bush Cabinet, the House, and the Senate, Sydney has no intention of being a soldier.

Like George Bush, Dick Cheney, John Ashcroft, Paul Wolfowitz, Dennis Hastert, Richard Perle, Tom DeLay and Rush Limbaugh, he refuses to fight in a war. Unlike those other guys, Sydney doesn't even want others to go in his place. But the mail keeps coming.

And it's scary. One postcard referred Sydney to usarmy.com, but Sydney couldn't read the Web site. Not because he's a dog, although that presents problems, but the main obstacle was the writing. It's equivalent to badly translated make-it-yourself bookshelf instructions. Here are some direct quotes:

"The U.S. Army follows a strict regime and has one of the level of its influence in the recent past."

"Besides army bases location other internal details are highly confidential and is only available to higher designated people."

"Its function is to develop the officers and imbibe in them the right amount of skills required by throughout the Department of Defense."

I doubt this is an official site - at least I hope it isn't. I think of the folks at the Pentagon as being a little savvier. Sydney also got a letter directing him to goarmy.com and at least that one looks to be written by people who are not imbibing.

The Pentagon recently admitted that it's been compiling data about our kids, including age, height, weight, ethnicity, personal e-mail address and cell phone numbers, grade-point average, and Social Security number, all without the permission of parents and apparently in violation of federal privacy laws. They acknowledged that they've secretly used this information to recruit kids as soldiers.

In fact, all American school districts that receive federal funding must provide personal data on each of their students to local military recruiters. It's a sleazy component of the No Child Left Behind law. School districts that don't comply can lose millions in federal funding.

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That's why I was happy to hear about LeaveMyChildAlone .org, a non-partisan Web site where real parents with real high school kids and real concerns about the war can go to opt out of all the military mail. People between 16 and 25, or parents of underage kids can sign up there to be taken off military recruiting lists.

This will appeal to a lot of parents who think that the war in Iraq is unjust and unworthy of more kids' lives. It will appeal to a lot of students who, like my dog, want nothing to do with war. Still others may opt out because they can't abide bad writing.

According to Salon.com, it's even appealing to a lot of Republicans who resent having their kids marketed to by the military and who see that marketing as an invasion of privacy.

Some people will no doubt be happy to receive the recruiting mail. Many families consider the military an appropriate environment for kids to learn responsibility; others will want to consider taking advantage of the money for college that the military offers to recruits who live through their tour of duty.

Many families have a long and proud tradition of military service. They may choose not to opt out. But surely it should be a choice.

Sydney's a dog so he doesn't need to opt out. He won't be going off to war.

He is, however, planning to host a peace rally at the dog park.

Barb Guy is a regular contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.