



Update from Congressman NEIL ABERCROMBIE

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Administration plans to cut National Guard are faulted

By Congressman Neil Abercrombie

Published in March 2006 edition of AUSA News

In 2001 the Bush Administration and Secretary Rumsfeld wanted to cut the active duty Army by two divisions. They lost that battle, but in a classic example of the fact that in Washington, DC no battle is ever really over, they are trying once more to downsize America's ground combat forces. This time, the National Guard is the target, which the Administration has proposed cutting by 17,000 troops as part of the elimination of six combat brigades.

I think few in Congress will be able to understand the reasoning behind this proposal. The last three years have seen the National Guard used more than any time since World War II, both at home and abroad. The National Guard has mobilized almost every one of its combat brigades and many of its support units to serve in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Balkans, or elsewhere. Here at home, the National Guard has played a critical role in disaster response and homeland security missions, most notably during the recent hurricane season in the Gulf Coast. The members of our National Guard have performed superbly no matter what the mission.

Beyond the recent heavy dependence on the National Guard lies the question of the National Military Strategy. The upcoming Quadrennial Defense Review is expected to endorse the current "1-4-2-1" strategy that requires a military that can do many things at the same time, from homeland security to peacekeeping to multiple combat operations. How can the Bush Administration re-endorse this policy and simultaneously recommend a reduction in US ground combat forces? We have seen that the length and size of our missions in Iraq and Afghanistan have placed a great deal of stress on our land forces, both active and reserve. It seems obvious that if faced with a similar conflict in the future, this stress would only be worse with a smaller pool of combat units to deploy. Clearly, unless the Administration is also willing to scale back its military strategy requirements it should not propose cutting ground forces already stretched thin.

So far, the justification for this proposal rests upon two dubious rationales. First, the Administration argues that the National Guard – due to recruiting and retention problems – is already down to 333,000 troops (from its authorized level of 350,000). Therefore, from their point of view, having a structure for that number of troops isn't really a reduction. Of course, the backwards nature of this argument is obvious. It suggests that due to the Guard's current recruiting problems – brought on by a war the Bush Administration chose to fight – it should be permanently reduced. This thinking is both punitive and misguided. It punishes the National Guard for recruiting problems it didn't create, and it suggests we should size our military based on recruiting estimates instead of the National Military Strategy. In other words, we should size our forces based on what some analysts think we can recruit instead of what our strategy dictates we need.

A second argument I expect to hear from the Department of Defense leadership is that these cuts are necessary to pay for Army weapon systems of the future. This rationale is wrong on two levels. First, nothing requires the military services to trade off within their own budgets between people and equipment. Simply cutting the National Guard as part of a budget cutting drill is not acceptable. If the Army needs more funding for procurement programs, the DOD should simply ask for it. A second problem with the idea of trading equipment for people is that the Army, unlike the Air Force and Navy, is not a "capital intensive" organization. The Army is based on people, and having quality people is the single most important factor in producing units that are ready to carry out their missions. The missions the Army has been engaged in since 9/11, such as nation-building and counter-insurgency, require quality manpower, not just new equipment.

Finally, aside from being an unwise thing to do on the merits, the Bush Administration's recommendation to cut the National Guard is an insult to the thousands of National Guard troops – including 3,000 National Guard troops from my state of Hawaii – who have been mobilized and deployed overseas and in the United States. The proposed cuts are also a slap in the face of Congress, which has fought repeatedly in the past three years to increase the size of the Army, not cut it. I expect opposition to these cuts to be broad and bipartisan, just as support for increasing the size of the Army has been.

The Constitution explicitly grants the power to "raise armies" to the Congress, and I expect Congress to do its job in this case and reject this misguided proposal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Neil Abercrombie". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Neil" being particularly prominent.

Neil Abercrombie
Member of Congress

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