

Declining Military Readiness: How Not to Support the Troops

Rep. Neil Abercrombie

The U.S. Army's 16th Infantry and 12th Cavalry display proudly on their unit colors the words, "Semper Paratus"—Always Ready. Today, due primarily to the War in Iraq, those words are more slogan than reality.

The state of our military readiness has dropped to historic lows. The Army's, in particular, has dropped to levels not seen since the 1970s, and it will continue to be stressed by the combat in Iraq, which falls most heavily on the Army and Marine Corps. This must be addressed immediately through legislation. Congress—and the Pentagon—should be held accountable. Congressional inaction itself constitutes knowing and deliberate failure to support our troops.

These facts speak for themselves:

- Only a handful of Army and Marine Corps units in the United States are fully combat ready, based on the military's own objective standards for amounts of equipment on hand, the number of troops available and training completed.
- National Guard units have only one-third of their authorized equipment — trucks, radios, armored vehicles, and night-vision devices. Two thirds of their equipment must be left behind in Iraq for guard units rotating in.
- To support Iraq deployments, the Marine Corps is calling back 2,500 reservists involuntarily — many of whom have already served in Iraq.
- The Army and Air National Guards continue to miss their monthly recruiting targets by 10 to 15%.

- The active U.S. Army is only meeting its recruiting goals by significantly lowering its standards in terms of age and high-school diplomas.

Overall, the United States has no strategic reserve because the military forces available to face threats other than Iraq face alarming shortages of people, equipment and training. Their deployment is impossible without putting them at risk. In military terms, the administration bombast about military “options” is devoid of practical capacity for implementation.

This week, Central Command admitted that the current level of U.S. forces in Iraq will have to be maintained until at least the middle of next year. What does this mean for the future?

First, the President will have no choice but to fully mobilize all 600-thousand members of the Army National Guard and Army Reserve indefinitely. There simply are not enough troops on active duty to sustain present deployment demands. Short of a draft, a full call-up of the reserves is the only option.

Secondly, Congress will have to add massive funding— tens of billions of dollars—to support this expansion of the military, necessitating cuts in every other aspect of government spending and definitely require massive tax increases.

Thirdly, when President Bush calls up the National Guard, it will be unprepared in equipment and training capacity without a crash program in vehicle and armament manufacture.

Those unwilling to consider the logic of these points can dismiss them as political. But they are looking into a mirror of disregard for the fate of our troops, and allowing bad politics is getting in the way of good policy. Simply put: seeking political advantage or cover by denying that a crisis exists regarding our readiness keeps us from confronting, let alone fixing the problem. Paraphrasing the President’s father: “This cannot and will not stand.”

There is an alternative to wrecking the U.S. military:

1. Get our troops out of Iraq. The cost — in financial and human terms — of maintaining the U.S. presence in Iraq is the primary factor in the military readiness crisis. Dramatically reducing the size of the U.S. force in Iraq will also allow the military to refit, rebuild and train.
2. Replace Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. New leadership in the Department of Defense is essential in the face of a complete lack of confidence in him by the military. We cannot reconstitute the armed forces with him in charge. While some might view this as a political attack, it is simply not possible to change defense policy without new leadership. That is the reality of changing direction at the Pentagon.
3. Repair the broken force. Restore the United States Army and Marine Corps to their former status: the best trained, best equipped fighting force in history, as they were before they were deployed to Iraq.

None of this will happen without our commitment to sustained and significant funding and the redeployment of U.S. troops from Iraq. Our soldiers and their families are the ones paying the real price for the war in Iraq, and for our spending priorities. Military readiness can be real or rhetorical — but bumper sticker slogans are no substitute for substance.

Congress must act now.

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