

What it will really take to rebuild U.S. military

Our forces desperately need more resources to fulfill their duties -- at home and abroad

By Rep. Neil Abercrombie and Rep. Solomon Ortiz

THE 110th Congress, convening in January under new leadership, will confront pressing problems on many fronts, but none more urgent or more critical than the virtual reconstruction of the U.S. military, particularly the Army and Marine Corps. To make the challenge even more daunting, this reconstruction will have to be done while most of the Army and Marine Corps are mired in a civil war; somewhat like overhauling the engine of a car moving at 65 mph.

The military readiness crisis is far broader and deeper than the number of men and women in uniform. Simply increasing the size of the Army, which, by the way, was authorized by Congress several years ago but never carried out, is a necessary step. Yet, by itself, it does nothing to address the quality, level of training or equipment condition of the total force.

The impact of the war in Iraq on the Army and Marine Corps has been terribly and unnecessarily destructive. It began with military planning that allowed the invasion to be used as a test drive for Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's "transformational" force. It continued with the obvious need -- totally dismissed -- for more troops on the ground immediately after the fall of Saddam Hussein, sending American men and women into combat without proper protective equipment, refusing to acknowledge the insurgency and failing to apply tactical lessons from past insurgent wars. It includes decisions to hide some of the true cost of the war by underfunding essential maintenance and repair on equipment.

Because the Bush administration has no exit strategy from this war, the Pentagon has had to redeploy troops a second and even third time, and call up reserves and National Guard units again and again. And, to try to replenish the supply of these troops, they've had to lower standards for new recruits and pay more and higher bonuses to hold on to experienced personnel

Here's what has been allowed to happen to our nation's first line of defense. Here's what the 110th Congress will have to address and correct:

- » Two-thirds of Army units in the United States are not combat ready because of severe shortages in equipment, training and troops.
- » Not one brigade combat team in the United States is fully trained and equipped to meet all potential deployments.
- » The Army has had to extend combat deployments in Iraq just to maintain the current force level.
- » The Marine Corps had to call 2,500 reservists back to active duty so their units in Iraq could be fully manned. These were reservists who had already served on active duty and were trying to return to their civilian lives.
- » The Army has had to pay up to \$40,000 re-enlistment bonuses to keep highly trained military personnel from walking away.

The Iraqi climate, marked by extreme temperatures and frequent sandstorms, causes abnormal wear on precision components, such as high-speed turbines in helicopter and tank engines. To complicate matters, when many units rotate back to the United States, they have to leave their equipment behind for the units rotating in. As a result, 40 percent of the Army's total ground equipment is now in Iraq or Afghanistan. That means even longer continuous use and less opportunity for maintenance and refit. A substantial amount of the Army National Guard's most critical equipment remains in Iraq or Afghanistan, which means many National Guard units do not have the equipment they need for training or responding to national emergencies and disasters when they're back home.

Since the start of the war, the Army has lost more than 1,000 wheeled vehicles and nearly 100 armored vehicles. Row after row after row of Abrams tanks and Bradley Fighting Vehicles sit in repair depots in Alabama and Arkansas and Pennsylvania because there's not enough money to fix them and get them back into service. The Army chief of staff has testified that he will need \$17.5 billion to restore equipment to proper fighting condition, plus \$12 billion a year until at least two years after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have ended. The Marine Corps will need \$11.7 billion to restore its equipment.

In August, the National Security Advisory Group, a distinguished panel chaired by former Secretary of Defense William Perry that includes former NATO Commander Gen. Wesley Clark and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. John Shalikashvili, characterized the decline in military readiness as "a serious failure of civilian stewardship of the military." The panel said the administration's "failure to adequately support the soldiers who are risking their lives for this nation is unacceptable," and called on

Congress to "restore the Army's readiness to the levels needed to safeguard this nation's interests at home and abroad."

We've reached this situation because the White House has insisted on fighting two wars at the same time -- without fully paying for either one. To remedy the problem -- and rebuild the military -- will require making some hard decisions about funding priorities. As always, there are many more needs than dollars.

Under the leadership of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the 110th Congress, and particularly the House Armed Services Committee under Chairman Ike Skelton, will be unswerving in our support for the troops. Every decision we make will be weighed by how it supports the troops. That means being sure that they're equipped with everything they need to carry out their mission effectively and safely. That means readiness levels for every unit must be raised and maintained at the highest possible level, including endstrength, training and equipment.

Supporting the troops means being honest with the American people about costs. Supplemental appropriations should no longer be used to minimize the war's true costs or to hide the fiscal impact on the national debt and every other federal program, priority and responsibility. National security is not a license to hide and cheat. Supporting the troops means that every contract must include steps for accountability -- every time, every contract. And it means that procurement decisions should always be measured by their battlefield impact.

Rebuilding the U.S. military will not happen overnight, and it will not happen on the cheap. But it must begin now. Allowing America's first line of defense to deteriorate again, as it has in the last three and a half years, would be negligent and dangerously short-sighted.

[U.S. Rep. Solomon Ortiz \(D-Texas\)](#) is the incoming chairman the House Armed Services Committee's Readiness Subcommittee. [U.S. Rep. Neil Abercrombie \(D-Hawaii\)](#) will be chairman of the Air-Land Subcommittee.

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