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editorial

Military manpower under stress

Congress should investigate reports of soldiers being threatened with transfer to Iraq-bound units if they don't volunteer to re-enlist, but this shoddy intimidation of our troops is only one symptom of a serious malady: The Army is stretched too thin.

U.S. Rep. Diana DeGette, D-Colo., aired the issue this past week when she took measure of reports coming out of Fort Carson and called for hearings into the Army's re-enlistment tactics.

At the same time, she used the dreaded D-word, musing that there might need to be a renewed draft if the military was to maintain such a heavy commitment. It's an election-year red herring, but it will strike a nerve with some young people, and their parents, as long as the U.S. presence in Iraq is so demanding. The draft was ended in 1973, toward the end of the Vietnam war. To keep things on course in Iraq, U.S. military officials have relied on extended and uncertain tours of duty, vigorous, recruitment practices, as well as unexpected National Guard and Army Reserve deployments that draw straight from Main Street.

DeGette said she's had several complaints about the coercive re-enlistment tactics. "Soldiers who have served honorably, fought in Iraq and are near the end of their service should not be threatened with impressment. How widespread is this? How high does this go in the Pentagon?"

Rep. Joel Hefley, R-Colo., a member of the House Armed Services Committee, says his office had received complaints, too, and that "soldiers shouldn't be getting any kind of ultimatum.

"The Armed Services Committee might hold hearings on the issue," he said, although "we're

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not into it deep enough yet."

Hefley says force reductions in the 1990s after the Cold War ended "went too far and too deep." He said officials are now talking about "adding 35,000 soldiers to the Army," which is stressed by missions in Iraq and Afghanistan and obligations across the world.

Drawn down after the Cold War, the active-duty Army, with 450,000 troops, and the Marine Corps, with 175,000, haven't been this small in decades. Both services provide ground troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. About 135,000 U.S. troops are in Iraq.

Long stretches of duty in Iraq are wearing thin and the re-enlistment rate is lagging. "We're going to have to develop a little balance between the Guard and regular duty service," Hefley said.

In the midst of all this, another election-year maneuver is the timely leak from senior Army officials that the service may shorten tours in Iraq from 12 months to six or nine. The troops would surely welcome the news, but who would pick up the slack? Another reserve unit?

DeGette says that if the military is going to strong-arm its own troops into re-enlistment, perhaps a draft might be needed to address the troop shortage, but no one really anticipates such a political nightmare. "I don't know anybody at the Pentagon who's pushing for a new draft," says Hefley. "And I don't know anybody in Congress pushing for a draft except Congressman (Charles) Rangel," the New York Democrat.

With President Bush and Sen. John Kerry both committed to maintaining the U.S. occupation in Iraq until the country is stable, military manpower is a problem that must be solved. Too few are being asked to do too much.

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