

Context for U.S. Military Readiness

For Members of Congress, Editors, Defense writers and other interested parties

DATE: March 12, 2007

FROM:

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This is not a political statement, nor an analysis of strategic military policy or world views. We focus here only on the practical realities of preparation at the ground level in determining military readiness as Congress prepares to debate how ready our military is to fight.

For our military to be ready to fight effectively – today and in the future – we have to be certain that we have the right people in the right roles with the right equipment and the right training to carry out their mission. How ready we were yesterday determines how well we fight today. How ready we are to fight today determines how well we fight tomorrow.

This Congress confronts a unique challenge in meeting its obligations to protect and equip American forces in combat because preparation for the war in Iraq was based on flawed intelligence and assumptions. As a result, the adventure in Iraq has depleted our force and drained our resources. The Administration and the military have been distracted from the original mission of finding al Qaeda leaders and disrupting and destroying their organization to try to prevent future attacks on the United States.

We now face an unprecedented situation in which military readiness is literally at the breaking point. This is not political hyperbole or partisan rhetoric. It is a fact. It is stark reality.

Yet our fighting men and women have done an extraordinary job in the face of nearly-continual combat, a confused mission, an amorphous, insurgent enemy, and systemic delays in the availability of necessary equipment and training. They will always have our support and we will never cut off the funding they need for current operations on the battlefield.

As Congress moves forward in 2007 and 2008 to limit the damage to our military from the war in Iraq and our precarious position between factions in a civil war, there is a context to the challenges we must confront: finding the way out of Iraq; improving the situation in the real war on terrorists in Afghanistan; fixing a broken military; and providing spending oversight so we don't break the country.

As it stands today, we continue to spend money we don't have and pay for that irresponsibility by raising taxes on our children. First before us is the matter of paying the bills for both wars and dealing with the damage done to our military.

PAYING THE BILLS

Congress must begin funding these major recurring costs of war through the regular budget process, while ensuring that we can move quickly to fund real emergencies, real unforeseen expenses and real battlefield needs. We must never abandon our troops who fight on behalf of this nation.

This president has treated past Congresses as a money spigot, funding military operations through emergency supplemental budget requests with no oversight. That's about to change. The American people can expect the Armed Services Committee to scrutinize the items requested by the Pentagon and the Administration in "emergency" supplemental requests.

Wars inevitably give rise to unforeseen circumstances and unexpected needs. We understand and appreciate that. However, we are no longer signing blank checks for defense spending unrelated to battlefield needs. We asked the Administration to identify and project all their funding needs and include them in the 2008 budget request that goes through the normal authorization and appropriations cycle.

We recently received the President's budget requesting three pots of money to fund military operations around the world:

- An emergency supplemental request of \$93.4 billion for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan (this is the 2nd supplemental for operations in 2007),
- The regular 2008 Defense Budget request of \$481.4 billion, and
- An emergency supplemental request of \$141.7 billion for 2008 for operations in both wars.

If supplemental appropriations are intended to address unanticipated emergencies that simply cannot wait for the regular appropriations process, such as replacing equipment lost or damaged in battle and other "war costs," how is it that we already have an emergency supplemental request to pay for emergencies NEXT year?

The President's 2007 request—according to the non-partisan Congressional Research Service—includes billions of dollars in developmental procurement spending under the guise of "emergency" replacement. Supplementals should address emergency needs for our men and women on the battlefield... not hidden procurement decisions for future defense systems that won't help soldiers on the ground for years to come.

How much will it cost for the needs of our war fighters in the field today? How much is needed to develop the weapons systems of tomorrow? Much of our work on the Armed Services Committee is matching our defense needs with the costs to meet them.

LONG TERM AND SHORT TERM READINESS

The most basic, strategic concern for U.S. military policy makers in the 21st Century are the emerging threats popping up around the world. Nobody can accurately forecast where the next enemy may emerge, or how future wars will be fought. At this moment, we are policing a low intensity conflict in the Balkans to make sure it remains low intensity; we are engaged in a war against al Qaeda/Taliban in Afghanistan; and we're being pounded by both sides in a civil war in Iraq. And yet no-one in their right mind would suggest that a force equipped and trained to defeat an opponent on a conventional battlefield is obsolete.

So, how do we prepare? What do we train for? What equipment do we develop and provide? Clearly, we have to be ready for any eventuality. Ensuring readiness is a continuous effort, badly damaged by our overextension in Iraq. Readiness has two parts for us in the current debate, long term and short term.

Short term readiness addresses the needs of soldiers in the field today. Both Iraq and Afghanistan have been marked by a lack of adequate funding for equipment, from effective Kevlar vests and helmets to up-armored Humvees, which are better able to protect our personnel from roadside bombs. Compounding the lack of equipment for both deployed and non-deployed units is the fact that, if non-deployed units don't have the same equipment they'll use in combat, their training is less than optimum.

Long term readiness addresses military preparation for any challenge our nation may face tomorrow. That encompasses everything from manpower, training and equipment to pre-positioned stores of military equipment strategically located around the world in case of emergencies; stocks, by the way, that the General Accountability Office (GAO) reports have been deeply ransacked for Iraq operations.

Long term readiness also includes fixing or “resetting” the force—making them whole; putting their equipment back the way it was before the war— which will be a costly enterprise, particularly for the Army and Marine Corps. Not one Army unit in the continental United States — including National Guard troops — could complete their assigned missions today ... either for wartime or responding to natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, fires, or attacks here at home.

Roughly half of all the ground equipment the U.S. Army owns is in Iraq or Afghanistan. Since the start of the war, the Army has lost nearly 2,000 wheeled vehicles and more than 100 armored vehicles. Harsh desert climate or mountainous terrain, virtually continuous combat and the physical weight of extra armor are wearing out equipment in Iraq and Afghanistan at up to nine times the normal rate.

Adding to the complex problem of providing and maintaining equipment is a GAO report detailing that the Army has not been keeping accurate track of what they have and what they need to reset the force, nor can they provide sufficient detail for Congress to provide effective oversight.

As bad as things are for the active duty Army, the situation is even worse for the National Guard. Between 75,000 and 100,000 pieces of National Guard equipment – worth nearly \$2 billion – are now in Iraq and Afghanistan instead of National Guard armories around the U.S. The regular Army has lost so much equipment – which has not been replaced – that they are using Guard equipment as replacements. Combined with the historic underfunding and deployment of some units to the U.S. Mexican border, National Guard units are left with about one-third of their equipment.

These urgent equipment shortages hit especially hard on the military’s ability to train. Both Guard and active Army units are forced to prepare and train for deployment with minimal equipment. Much of their equipment is not delivered until they arrive for brief training in Kuwait and Iraq, just before they are thrown into combat.

Here’s an example of why troops must train with the equipment they will carry into battle. Soldiers in the U.S. are not getting shot at, so ostensibly one might think they needn’t train with body armor. Wrong. There’s an old saying: “you train like you fight so you’ll fight like you train.” Soldiers here must train in the body armor they will wear into battle because it is heavier than their battle packs and restricts body movement. They have to get used to it. When every second – and every advantage – counts, it casts a different light on what equipment soldiers need to train with.

PUTTING MYSTERY IN MILITARY READINESS

This administration classifies so many aspects of our readiness indicators that the Iraqis, Afghans, and foreign fighters in both wars know more about the holes in our military readiness than the American people do—those who foot the bill for our military and for whom our military fights.

While some readiness indicators are appropriately classified, others should be open for public discussion. Only an honest discussion of this issue will allow us to identify the resources necessary to fix our readiness problems. Some of these classified matters are unavailable even to Members of Congress who do not serve on the Armed Services Committee, but who are charged with finalizing legislation to fund our military and battlefield needs.

UNSEEN COST TO RECRUITMENT AND VETERANS

Iraq has badly damaged our military recruitment. In 2005, the Army missed its recruiting goal by more than 8%, or almost 6,700 soldiers. Army end strength was kept up by offering expensive signing bonuses to currently serving soldiers.

Currently, we have a “backdoor draft” (not letting service members leave when their tours are complete and extending combat deployment of units in Iraq) just to retain our current force. Much of the coming escalation will include soldiers essentially “backdoor drafted” for duty, turning the Guard and Reserve into *de facto* active duty units by virtue of multiple, continuous deployments.

GAO also found increasing numbers of alleged and substantiated cases of wrong-doing by recruiters as they seek to convince people to serve under more difficult conditions.

Causalities are coming home at the fastest rate since Vietnam – the total number of injured (almost 24,000) and killed (over 3,100) in Iraq and Afghanistan each month is roughly equal to a battalion. We have never been able to meet fully the demand for health services for the men and women who have worn our uniform.

Exhaustive reports about life in recovery at Walter Reed, the “Crown Jewel” of the Army’s medical system, have saddened or sickened all who read them. How we treat the men and women who come home from war traumatized in mind or decimated in body reflects badly on each one of us. The reality that soldiers recovering from devastating wounds, while fighting with their government for disability checks, tarnishes the greatness of this nation.

One of the initial ideas for fixing Walter Reed is to re-open the base closure process (commonly called BRAC) to exempt Walter Reed from closing. That’s certainly one option, but Congress should know that by opening up the BRAC decisions again, we will cause unmitigated pain at installations and communities around the nation.

BRAC was an economic tsunami for many communities around the country. We must approach that option with tremendous caution. If there is one exception to the BRAC law, we could be forced to make other exceptions. Bear in mind that numerous communities around the U.S. have begun to make fundamental changes in their local economies and many of them have made complex plans and spent tremendous amounts of money in preparation for BRAC.

CONCLUSION:

We have always had the finest fighting force in the world. Maintaining that quality means continuing to recruit and retain the best people and training them to the highest standards. The challenges caused by the war in Iraq will take many years and dedicated effort to reverse.

All of this presents a strategic gamble for the nation we serve and the forces which protect it. Decreased readiness levels will make it harder to succeed in Afghanistan or Iraq ... or anywhere else.

Our soldiers – and their families – are carrying the burden of these wars. The rest of us must move quickly to repair the damage before the burden becomes unsustainable. We can no longer simply observe their sacrifice on TV. Congress must reassert its Constitutional duty to provide for our armed services. This must begin with the Armed Services Committees and the Defense Authorization bill.

We pledge a vigorous oversight on behalf of our troops, and for the American people.

Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports of note:

- Biennial suggestions for Congressional oversight (<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d07235r.pdf>)
- National Guard readiness: (<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06170t.pdf>)
- Equipment shortfalls at critical levels (<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06141.pdf>)
- Recruitment challenges: (<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06846.pdf>)
- Improved Oversight and Increased Coordination Needed to Ensure Viability of the Army's Prepositioning Strategy (<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d07144.pdf>)
- The Congressional Budget Office contends the troop escalation President Bush announced in Jan 07 would actually require many more troops than the 21,500 he announced: (<http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/77xx/doc7778/TroopIncrease.pdf>)
- Preliminary Observations on the Army's Implementation of Its Equipment Reset Strategies (<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d07439t.pdf>)

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