

US troops voice anger at Pentagon

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Last week witnessed an extraordinary event in Iraq. Uniformed soldiers from one of the US Army's main combat units openly denounced Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld on ABC national news and demanded that they be brought home. Other media outlets published interviews with soldiers declaring that their morale was "non-existent."

The eruption of anger was triggered by a July 14 announcement that there was no longer a firm date for the withdrawal from Iraq of the 1st and 2nd Brigades of the Third Infantry Division. The news contradicted assurances made the previous week by division commander Major General Blount, Rumsfeld himself and General Tommy Franks that the units would be back in the US by September. It brought an abrupt end to the homecoming preparations by both the Third Infantry soldiers and their wives and families at the unit's bases in Georgia. A military spokesman stated: "That time frame has basically gone away, and there is no time frame." The change in plans is believed to have been prompted by the Indian government's refusal to send 17,000 troops to assist the Bush administration in the occupation of Iraq.

The reaction of troops of the Third Infantry's 2nd Brigade ranged from mutinous to despondent.

Specialist Clinton Deitz told ABC News: "If Donald Rumsfeld was here I'd ask him for his resignation." Sergeant Felipe Vega said he felt "kicked in the guts, slapped in the face." Private Jayson Punyhotra declared that "it pretty much makes me lose faith in the Army." Referring to the decks of cards carrying the photographs of Iraqi leaders that were given to US soldiers, a sergeant who asked to remain unnamed told the ABC reporters: "I've got my own 'Most Wanted List.' The aces in my deck are Paul Bremer, Donald Rumsfeld, George Bush and Paul Wolfowitz."

Sergeant Siphon Pahn told the *Los Angeles Times*: "Tell Donald Rumsfeld the 2nd Brigade is stuck in Fallujah, and we're very angry." Another soldier told the paper: "People say Rumsfeld needs to get out office." Sergeant Eric Wright told BBC News: "We're exhausted. Mentally and physically exhausted to the point that someone hoped they would get wounded so they could go home. 'Hey shoot me, I want to go home.'"

Specialist Sean Gilchrist told Knight-Ridder correspondents: "It feels like we're forgotten, like we fell off the planet." Private Anthony Mondello told Knight-Ridder: "All b.s. aside, our morale is gone, it really is." An officer who declined to be named told the news service: "It doesn't seem like anybody higher up cares to realize what these soldiers have been through, or what they're going through on a daily basis. I can guarantee you they've never stood out in a checkpoint in the heat of the day, day after day, full battle rattle, always wondering if today's the day somebody's going to shoot me. Do they even care?"

Private Jason Ring spoke to the *San Francisco Chronicle* in Fallujah: "We liberated Iraq. Now the people here don't want us here, and guess what? We don't want to be here either. So why are we here? Why don't they bring us home?"

Army wives in the US denounced the White House in equally vitriolic terms. Julie Galloway, the wife of a sergeant, told the Associated Press: "They've bald-faced lied to us." Tasha Moore, the wife of a captain, declared: "My solution for President Bush and Donald Rumsfeld and all

those people is just keep your mouth shut. If you don't know the truth, don't say anything at all. Every time a soldier is shot and killed it comes to mind—is that my husband? I don't think the government understands what a husband or a wife or children are going through every day."

The US Army is considering disciplinary action against the men. The new commander of the US forces in Iraq, General John Abizaid, told a press conference on July 16: "None of us that wear this uniform are free to say anything disparaging about the Secretary of Defense or the President of the United States. We're not free to do that. It's our professional code. Whatever action may be taken, whether it's a verbal reprimand or something more stringent, is up to the commanders on the scene and it's not for me to comment."

The American media, in typical fashion, sensationalized the insubordinate statements and moved on to the next story. For a number of reasons, however, they merit deeper consideration. They testify to a staggeringly rapid disintegration in the cohesion of the US military occupation of Iraq.

There is undoubtedly widespread weariness and battle fatigue among troops in units like the Third Infantry. The division was kept in a fever pitch of readiness for a war on Iraq more or less since the September 11, 2001, terror attacks on the US. In March 2002, it was ordered to maintain a brigade presence in Kuwait indefinitely—with the 3rd Brigade undertaking the first six-month tour of duty. During September and October 2002, it was replaced by the 2nd Brigade. By March 2003, in the countdown to the invasion, the entire division was in Kuwait.

The horrors the soldiers saw and the atrocities they committed during the war are another factor. The Third Infantry was among the first US military units to cross into Iraq and carried out the main thrust on Baghdad, capturing the city's international airport on April 3. According to numerous reports at the time, the soldiers passed by the corpses of hundreds of Iraqis who had been slaughtered by US air strikes. The division conducted its own mass killings in Baghdad. On April 5, it was the tanks of the 2nd Brigade that carried out the three-hour rampage through the city's southern suburbs that left as many as 3,000 Iraqi soldiers and civilians dead and thousands more wounded. A soldier told the *New York Times*: "There were people lying all over the side of the road. I couldn't even count how many." Men who had participated in such acts would understandably want to place as much distance between themselves and Iraq as possible.

By far, the most critical factor in military morale, however, is ideological commitment. Throughout history, soldiers have endured immense privations and, even if defeated, maintained loyalty to their commanders and belief in the cause for which they were sent to fight. The fact that just four months after invading Iraq American troops want no part in the post-war occupation can only be understood as a judgment on the war itself. American soldiers know that the justifications for the war were lies.

They also know that whatever support existed for attacking Iraq at home is rapidly evaporating as it sinks in that Iraq had no "weapons of mass destruction" and was never a threat to the US. The American people, and the soldiers in particular, have been left with the sick feeling in their

stomachs that tens of thousands of Iraqis and more than 225 Americans have been killed so that the Bush administration could carry out the neo-colonial conquest of an oil-rich and strategically important country.

The Bush administration lie that has had perhaps the most demoralizing effect on the soldiers was the claim they would be treated as “liberators.” This propaganda was drilled into American soldiers for more than a year before the war. Instead, they have confronted a civilian population that overwhelmingly despises them as invaders and will provide a never-ending stream of recruits to the anti-American resistance movements.

The 2nd Brigade, for example, has since May been policing Fallujah—one of the most restive of Iraq’s major cities. The *Los Angeles Times* reported on July 15 on the reaction the brigade received when it attempted to give away frozen chickens in an attempt to “win the hearts and minds” of the population. At a number of mosques, the local Sunni imams refused to accept the food. One cleric told the American troops: “We would rather eat rocks than eat chickens from Americans. Even the poorest person in Fallujah doesn’t want chickens from you.” Soldiers were forced to drive the truckload of chickens back through a hail of stones and bricks from local children.

Other units face a similar situation in the numerous cities, towns and villages between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers where the majority of the Iraqi population lives.

Based on the prediction that the Iraqi people would welcome US forces, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asserted before the invasion that a force of just 40,000 to 60,000 US troops would be sufficient for a post-war occupation. Three months after “victory,” 146,000 US troops cannot claim to be in control of Baghdad, let alone the rest of the country.

On an average day, one American soldier dies somewhere in Iraq—at least 88 deaths since May 1—and between five and ten are wounded. Military convoys traveling along the main six-mile, six-lane highway between the airport and Baghdad, for example, do so at the constant risk of attack. Last Monday, one US soldier was killed and 10 wounded when a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) struck a vehicle. An American paratrooper at the scene told the *Washington Post*: “Unless you put a tank every 10 feet, there’s nothing you can do.”

Another US convoy was attacked with RPGs in Baghdad last Wednesday, killing one American and wounding six. The same day, two other attacks in Baghdad wounded three US troops, while the US-appointed Iraqi mayor of Hadithah, to the west of the capital, was assassinated. On Friday, a remotely detonated bomb struck a convoy crossing a bridge near Fallujah. Three vehicles were damaged, at least one soldier from the Third Infantry was killed and an unreported number were wounded. Over the weekend, three US troops were killed in Baghdad and Mosul, and a mass anti-American demonstration was held in Najaf by Shi’ite Muslims—the Iraqis whom the White House insisted would be the most enthusiastic supporters of a US invasion.

Based on the historical experience of guerrilla warfare, it will not be long before the resistance movements learn how to inflict far greater casualties. On July 17, for the second time in two weeks, resistance fighters fired a surface-to-air missile at a transport plane landing at Baghdad airport. Harlan Ullman, an advocate of the war and one of the authors of the “shock and awe” tactics of the invasion, responded by warning: “What happens, for example, when they go after a big airplane flying into Baghdad or blow up the Al-Rashid hotel (in Baghdad)? We better be prepared.”

The Bush administration’s miscalculations and arrogant self-delusion over what it perceived as unlimited American power has left the US military in a quagmire. Soldiers in Iraq are hearing that the US will have troops in the country for up to 10 years, but at the same time they are being told there are not enough troops to replace them. Of the Army’s 33 combat brigades, 16 are already in Iraq, 2 are in Afghanistan, 2 are in South Korea and 1 is still in Kosovo. Of the 12 brigades in the US, 3 are

in modernization training, 3 are in reserve for possible deployment to a war on the Korean peninsula and 2 are pre-slotted to relieve the troops in Afghanistan. Only 4 brigades are left to relieve 16.

There are indications that the debacle is fueling a long-running conflict between Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and the Army command. Articles appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* giving voice to the Army’s complaints that it is stretched to the limit and that the prospect of being sent to Iraq is affecting both retention and enlistment rates. The Pentagon is under pressure to take unprecedented steps to relieve the Army personnel stranded in Iraq. New assurances have been given that the Third Infantry will be withdrawn soon. Marine units, which are not normally used for “peace-keeping” actions, are likely to be deployed. More controversially, it is being suggested that as many as 10,000 part-time National Guardsmen will be called up by the end of the year for a *13-to-16-month full-time period of duty* and sent to Iraq.

Even with such measures, anyone in or joining the US Army can expect for the indefinite future to spend stressful, yearlong tours in Iraq fighting and possibly dying in an unjustified war of repression against legitimate guerrilla resistance. Those who return will only be sent back to Iraq or on to another overseas deployment after a brief break in the US. The inevitable relationship breakups and other personal difficulties will increase the trauma. There have already been nine deaths of American servicemen in Iraq due to what the military calls “non-hostile shootings”—often a euphemism for suicide. How long will it be before distraught soldiers begin shooting their officers or each other?

The pro-war mantra is always “Support the troops.” The troops—mainly working class youth who joined the military as a ticket to an otherwise unattainable college education or some decent skills—correctly feel they have no business in Iraq and want to come home. The occupation is a monstrosity that must be ended by the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all American and foreign military forces.



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