

New signs of discontent in the military

“Stop-loss” orders prevent soldiers from leaving US Army

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The new and broader “stop-loss” order just invoked by the US Army on active, National Guard and reserve troops currently deployed in the Middle East reflects growing Pentagon worries over manpower shortages as the occupation of Iraq drags on and new military adventures are considered in other parts of the world.

Last November 13, the army issued “stop-loss” orders covering the 110,000 troops scheduled to be rotated into the Middle East combat zone between now and May. As part of the massive troop rotation, the army brass claim they need to hold on to experienced troops in order to provide “continuity and consistency” among deployed units. Because the stop-loss edict begins 90 days prior to deployment and lasts for 90 days after returning home, the order means in effect that these troops will be prohibited from leaving the army until at least the spring of 2005.

The latest order covers the 160,000 troops scheduled to return from the war zone. Of this total, 7,000 were scheduled to leave the army when their deployment ended. They will be forced to remain deployed, and for up to another 90 days after they return home.

The authority to issue stop-loss orders, enabling the Pentagon to override regulations and keep personnel in uniform, was first granted after the Vietnam War and was not used until the buildup to the Persian Gulf War in 1990. In the last two years these orders have been used increasingly and repeatedly for broader sections of the army. Whereas they were previously targeted at specific skill groups, the November and January orders covered all units. In the last two years more than 40,000 soldiers, including 16,000 National Guard and reserves, have been blocked from retiring or leaving.

The stop-loss orders are not the only signs of manpower worries for the Pentagon. A bonus program designed to encourage reenlistment took effect on January 1. The army is offering bonuses of up to \$10,000 to soldiers in Iraq, Kuwait and Afghanistan if they agree to reenlist for three

years or more. The military brass are clearly worried about drops in enlistment and reenlistment as the Iraq quagmire deepens.

No figures have been released and the army claims it is getting recruits, but it is clear that enlistment and reenlistment have been affected. The great majority of soldiers in Iraq see no reason for risking their lives and are counting the days until they return. The massive troop rotation, by promising an end date for most of those in the war zone, is in part an attempt to deal with this growing morale problem.

The number of US soldiers killed in combat in Iraq since the invasion has just passed the 500 mark, and more than 2,379 have been wounded, large numbers of them disabled, in the growing insurgency. The army admits to a total of 21 suicides thus far in Iraq, but acknowledges that a number of non-combat deaths are still under investigation.

Despite media efforts to cover up the depth of the dilemma facing the military, several reports on the response to the bonus offer from troops inside Iraq reflect this crisis. In Baqouba, a city 35 miles northeast of Baghdad, a 23-year-old specialist from the army’s 4th Infantry Division manning a checkpoint told the Associated Press, “Man, they can’t pay me enough to stay here ... there’s not enough money in the world to make me stay a month longer.” Justin Brown, 22, from Atoka, Oklahoma, also part of the 4th Infantry Division, stated, “I don’t want to be in the army forever and just keep fighting wars.” A sergeant from the 1st Armored Division on the road leading north from Baghdad toward the “Sunni Triangle,” a center of resistance to the US occupation, also explained that he was not interested in the money because he had been shot at several times, adding, “I don’t want to die here.”

The effort to expand combat forces with members of the National Guard and Army Reserve troops has stirred up rank-and-file opposition. These weekend-duty soldiers, who never expected to leave their jobs and families for a year, currently

make up about 25 percent of the total of 130,000 US forces in Iraq, but the proportion is expected to rise to nearly 40 percent by the time the impending troop rotation is completed. Recruited with promises of part-time service and little or no danger of combat, these soldiers now have no idea when they will be able to resume their lives. Stop-loss orders have been used to extend their service for a year or more in many cases. Moreover, a growing percentage of the US casualties in Iraq are reservists. Of the 39 names released for deaths in December, 10 were members of the National Guard or reserves, up from 14 percent of the deaths in November.

Livid soldiers have described the new policy as what amounts to an unannounced return of the draft.

"I'm furious. I'm aggravated. I feel violated. I feel used," Chief Warrant Officer Ron Eagle, 42, of West Virginia told the *Washington Post*. He was due for retirement last February after 20 years of service. This month he will be sent to Iraq for an additional tour of duty that is likely to last 18 months.

Guardsmen and reservists have complained that their release dates have been extended so many times they no longer know when they will be allowed to leave. "We don't ever trust anything we're told," explained Chris Walsh of Southington, Connecticut. His wife Jessica, an eighth-grade English teacher, is serving in a National Guard unit in Baghdad. He added that his wife may end up serving two years beyond her original exit date of July 2002. "We've been disappointed too many times," he said.

Last month, a group of angry reservists sent out an email, entitled "Chained in Iraq," protesting that their careers and businesses back home were being devastated because of their enforced absence. Jim Montgomery, an air conditioning repairman in western Massachusetts, served three years in the army in the '90s and then signed up for five years in the National Guard. His commitment was up in July 2003, at which point he planned to devote his time to getting his electrician's license and to the impending birth of his child.

"I felt that I honored my contract," said Montgomery. "The military had given me some good things—friendships and the opportunity to take some college courses—and that's where I wanted to leave it," he added. Montgomery is currently stationed in southern Iraq and the latest he has heard is that his unit may be coming home sometime in April, but even that is uncertain.

Wives of reservists have voiced their outrage as well. Margo Loomis sent an email to Reuters saying that she is engaged to a captain in the Army Rangers who was supposed to return home in May 2002. She has been told to expect him to remain in Iraq until at least next Christmas. "Every minute of every day is filled with concern for him.

From my understanding, soldiers were not to be sent to war-zone type of deployments for longer than six months. I guess our country is no longer playing by the rules."

The Bush administration is being driven by its economic and political crisis toward new military adventures, but its first attempts to reorganize the world in the interests of the American ruling elite have exposed huge problems. The volunteer army, 30 years after the end of the Vietnam-era draft, is not quite the success story it was called when it carried out small-scale operations in places such as Grenada and Panama, or in the first Gulf War in 1991.

The much-vaunted high-tech warfare must be accompanied by the deployment of US troops in sufficient numbers to "pacify" Iraq and prepare for new challenges. The army's legal manpower limit of 480,000 active-duty soldiers, set by Congress, has now been breached and has risen to 500,000. Current deployments include 130,000 in Iraq, 11,000 in Kuwait, 11,500 in Afghanistan, and another 82,000 in Korea and Japan.

When then-Army Chief of Staff Shinseki warned that several hundred thousand US soldiers would be required for an occupation of Iraq, he was publicly denounced by the Pentagon. Donald Rumsfeld claimed that 50,000 troops would be sufficient. Today the Pentagon claims, based again on the "optimistic" scenarios so popular in the Pentagon, that only 50,000 will be needed by the end of 2005. Meanwhile it is scrambling to maintain its troop levels while contending with growing demoralization and opposition within the ranks and among families at home.

As of yet, no one in the administration will even discuss the possibility of a reinstitution of the draft. Clearly, the current level of anger and opposition is only the palest sample of the reaction that would take place if young people are again subjected to mandatory service. The stop-loss orders, bonus offers and increased use of reserves are increasingly desperate stopgap measures to deal with this growing military and political dilemma short of bringing back the draft.



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