

Iraq troop rotation plan: Pentagon prepares for next war

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Over 250,000 US soldiers will leave or arrive in Iraq between now and the end of May in the largest rotation of troops in a combat zone that has been attempted by the American military since World War II. The risks of the massive movement of personnel and hardware are considerable and its implications, given the record of the Bush administration, are ominous. The rotation is designed to allow six battle-hardened US Army divisions that have been worn out by lengthy deployments in 2003 to rest, refit, and be combat-ready again as early as September.

The active full-time US Army does not have the manpower to both garrison the occupation force in Iraq and conduct another major war. In answer to the critics who had warned of this before the invasion, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld declared that only 50,000 troops would be needed to maintain control over Iraq within a matter of months. With the first anniversary of the war approaching, however, there are still 130,000 in the country, including 17 of the Army's 33 active combat brigades and armored cavalry regiments.

Of the remaining Army strength, two brigades are rotating in or out of Afghanistan and two more are permanently based in South Korea. Two further brigades are undergoing retraining with the Army's new Stryker vehicles and are not available. The three brigades of the Third Infantry Division, which spearheaded the American assault on Baghdad, only returned from Iraq in August and are still in the 120-day "resetting" period allocated for divisions to return to combat readiness.

With only seven brigades available and most of the brigades in Iraq having been on deployment for approaching 12 months, Pentagon planners would have had to consider extending tours-of-duty or sending back the Third Infantry after only a six-to-eight-month spell in the US. Instead, the decision was taken to have as much of the Army available for other purposes later in 2004 by reducing the size of the Iraq occupation force and ordering an unprecedented deployment of the Marine Corp and part-time National Guard and reservists. Even the Navy and Air Force have been instructed to send personnel for ground occupation duties in Iraq.

By mid-2004, the number of American troops in Iraq will have fallen to approximately 105,000, and the number of combat brigades will have fallen from 17 to 13.

The Marine Corp has been ordered to send 21,500 troops to Iraq to take over policing the west of the country—the first large-scale use of the marines for what is considered a "peace-keeping" operation. The composition of the marine force highlights that the decision to keep the Third Infantry in the US was not due to concern over the impact on morale of another deployment. Most of the marines who are Iraq-bound are from the First Marine Division, which only returned to its

California base in May after playing a key combat role in the invasion. It is now going back for at least another seven-month tour-of-duty.

The Pentagon estimates that some 39,000 of the new troops—close to 40 percent of the total force—will be National Guard or reservists. Over 15,000 National Guard infantry are being sent for 12-month's frontline duty in some of the most volatile areas of the country such as Baghdad, Mosul and cities in the so-called "Sunni Triangle" such as Tikrit.

The active Army is therefore only contributing 45,000 to 50,000 troops to Iraq during this year—the number the Bush administration had based its plans around.

The rotation will cause a temporary increase in the number of US troops in Iraq, due to the overlap of departing and arriving personnel. The military is likely to exploit this to conduct major offensives against the resistance over the coming weeks, at least in part to blood the new forces. Overall, however, the urgency of the Pentagon to get its main combat divisions back into their bases has produced a rotation plan which is permeated with indifference to the lives of rank-and-file soldiers and will place them at far greater risk.

The Iraqi resistance has proven since the New Year that it has the ability to launch accurate mortar strikes on military bases, shoot down helicopters and hit aircraft over Baghdad International Airport with surface-to-air missiles. The massive troop movement, with tens of thousands of men and thousands of vehicles and aircraft in motion, will produce inevitable logistical complications and afford the resistance plenty of targets.

"Even if in the US we tried to move 220,000 people out of one airport it would be a nightmare. The magnitude of all this happening simultaneously, there in Iraq, is just overwhelming," a retired general, William Pagonis, told the *Los Angeles Times* December 10. The *Times* noted: "Military planners are massaging the multitude of details of the rotation—where and when helicopters will take troops and over what routes, how to mass departing troops in the few airports and airstrips in Iraq without making them sitting ducks and assigning hundreds of soldiers to guard the routes."

Helicopters are particularly vulnerable. The *Hartford Courant* commented November 8: "US forces depend on helicopters such as the Chinook and the Blackhawk to move troops and equipment quickly and efficiently, but the speed and agility comes at a price. They are also large, low-flying targets for an enemy eager to create havoc and kill Americans."

As well as having to deal with a greater risk of attack, the troops rotating in are being sent with far less capabilities than the heavily-armored units they are replacing.

The First Cavalry Division, which is currently preparing to rotate

into Iraq, has been ordered to leave two-thirds of its Abram tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles behind in the US and deploy most of its units with humvees instead. The official reason is to enable the armored troops to function as highly mobile infantry. A *Washington Post* report in September points to another calculation. It appears likely that the troops of the First Cavalry are being sent to Iraq with jeeps so that the Army can focus its maintenance budget on the tanks and Bradleys of the returning troops.

The US Army budgets to replace the tracks on Bradleys annually, based on an estimate that they will travel 800 miles in the average year. In Iraq, the vehicles have been doing 1,200 miles *per month*, blowing out fuel costs and requiring new tracks every 60 days. Track supply shortages had left as many as one third of the vehicles unusable at particular times. The divisions that are returning to the US will be bringing back with them thousands of tanks and Bradleys, all of which will require major maintenance. The *Post* reported that track replacement costs for Bradleys alone had soared from \$78 million to \$230 million last fiscal year.

The First Cavalry troops will at least have the armored version of the humvee, which provides some protection against the impact of an improvised explosive device, a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) or heavy machine gun fire. Most troops in Iraq do not even have that. Only one in eight of the thousands of jeeps currently in use by the occupation forces are armored. A military police colonel told *Newsday* December 14: “We’re kind of sitting ducks in the vehicles we have.” Military planners made the incredible estimate on May 1, 2003, that only 235 armored humvees would be needed for all post-war Iraq. A desperate scramble is underway to increase that to 3,200, but it will take until mid-2005.

There are also concerns about the Army’s new wheeled, lightly-armored Stryker vehicles that are being used now in Iraq by the newest unit to arrive, the Third Brigade of the Second Infantry Division. While the Strykers feature the latest technology of digitised warfare, they are not designed to take the type of fire that a tank or the Bradleys are capable of sustaining. They also cannot fire accurately except when stationary and their guns must be reloaded from outside the vehicle. The military rushed the deployment of the Strykers, however, without even reinforcing them with an extra outer plate of armor that can withstand the impact of a RPG—one of the preferred weapons of the Iraqi guerrillas.

Patrick Garrett, an analyst for *GlobalSecurity.org*, told the *Seattle Times*: “The Stryker is uniquely controversial.... You’ve got people jumping up and down and screaming bloody murder over this, and you have people who are willing to let the Army try it and see what happens. And everyone will be watching to see how effective they are in Iraq.”

An assessment published on December 3 by the web site *Debka.com* made the following chilling observation: “They [Army commanders] expect casualties to rise initially when the new system is first tested in battle. Further improvements will inevitably be called for.”

On December 15, just a week after the brigade arrived in Iraq, guerrillas destroyed their first Stryker with a roadside bomb outside Balad. One US soldier was wounded.

The Bush administration is increasingly treating the military demands of occupying Iraq as an annoying diversion from its broader foreign policy objectives. To reduce the need to send any more Army personnel after the rotation, the Pentagon has invoked a sweeping “stop loss” order on all the active, National Guard and reserve troops deploying to the Middle East. The “stop loss” prohibits a soldier

leaving the military if their term of enlistment expires during their tour-of-duty until 90 days after their unit comes back to the US sometime in 2005.

Both the “stop loss” orders and the escalating use of the National Guard for overseas combat operations are a thinly disguised substitute for the draft. The 360,000 National Guardsmen are a particularly large and cheap source of cannon fodder for occupation duties. As they are part-time, the government is not responsible for their housing, health care or other maintenance costs after they come back from overseas and are de-mobilised. The wages of a National Guard soldier not on full-time duty are only 20 percent of active Army personnel. Even including the costs of the training the part-time soldiers undertake and the equipment they use, their annual cost to the Pentagon is less than 50 percent of full-time personnel.

It is highly likely that a massive call-up of National Guard units not currently on duty is on the agenda later this year—possibly as many as 10 combat brigades. That will be the only way the US Army can sustain its deployments not only in Iraq, but also in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kosovo, South Korea and other locations around the globe, and have its active divisions free for new predatory wars.

The logistical preconditions for another war will begin to take shape from as early as July. The rotation schedule means that by March the Army will have back in US bases the bulk of its rapid deployment force, the four division-plus XVIII Airborne Corps, which formed the backbone of the invasion of Iraq. The units will then be given four months to “reset” for use elsewhere. By September, the heavily-armored Fourth Infantry and First Armored Divisions will also have been “reset” after their Iraq deployment.

Coinciding with the Army schedule, 11 of the US Navy’s 12 aircraft carrier strike groups are also currently out of service undergoing maintenance or post-maintenance training. All of them will be available for deployment by mid-2004.

In the months leading up to the US presidential election, the White House will have both the fleet and 120,000 battle-experienced troops to attack the next target in the “war on terror”. The American soldiers occupying Iraq will be left to be killed and wounded to protect this earlier conquest, one suspects in ever-greater numbers.



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