

US Army's expanded "stop-loss" program prevents thousands from leaving military

David Walsh
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Under an order signed by the US Army's assistant secretary for manpower and reserve affairs June 1 thousands of soldiers in units scheduled to serve in Iraq or Afghanistan will be forced to spend over a year more than they had planned in the military. Any soldier whose unit is 90 days or less from deploying in the Middle East or Central Asia will not be able to leave the service or transfer to another unit until 90 days after his or her tour of duty in the war zone ends.

Various "stop-loss" (which blocks service members from retiring or leaving the service at their scheduled time) and "stop-move" (preventing permanent changes of station) programs have been implemented in a piecemeal fashion since the invasion and occupation of Iraq, applied to specific phases of the colonial-style operation. Now the stop-loss/stop-move restrictions have been expanded and made universal, applying to all army units bound for Iraq or Afghanistan, and they will be in place "for several years," according to Maj. Gen. Frank L. Hagenbeck, the army's chief for personnel matters.

In outlining the new plan, military spokesmen defended it on the grounds, in Hagenbeck's words, that it would help ensure "cohesive, combat-ready units. We want to build them, train them and deploy them together as a team."

The ongoing insurgency in Iraq and renewed unrest in Afghanistan, as well as plans for other military interventions around the globe, have presented Pentagon planners with dramatic challenges. The US military is stretched thin, with 138,000 troops in Iraq and 12,000 in Afghanistan deployed more or less indefinitely. Significant elements of all 10 of the Army's active duty divisions are in the area, or are scheduled to deploy there.

The army newspaper, the *Stars and Stripes*, reports in its European edition June 3 that the stop-loss/stop-move announcement "comes at a time when the service is scrambling to find enough units to cover multiple large missions, with no end in sight to the deployments. Every available unit is on the table, service officials have said, regardless of how sacrosanct or 'untouchable' they might have been in the past."

Washington's recent decision to withdraw several thousand soldiers from South Korea and send them to the Middle East underscores the strain. The unit to which the troops belong, the 2nd Infantry Brigade, had been described by a senior army official as the "ultimate sacred cow." The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, the vaunted "Opposing Force" from the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, is "under consideration" for a deployment, Hagenbeck confirmed June 1.

Nearly 1,000 US troops have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, while the military has carried out an estimated 21,000 medical evacuations (some of which may include more than one trip for a

single patient) from Iraq since the invasion in March 2003.

The stop-loss program will mean economic hardship for many soldiers and their families and inevitably fan resentment against the military high command and the Iraqi conflict. In an Op-Ed piece in the *New York Times* June 2, Andrew Exum, a former army captain, who served in Afghanistan, commented about his former unit, "Yet even after two deployments to Afghanistan, and with many nearing the end of their commitments, these soldiers will have to head to Iraq this summer and remain there for at least a year. I remain close with them, and as the unit received its marching orders a few called me to express their frustration. To a man, they felt a sense of hopelessness—they know they have little say over their future until the Army releases them."

Exum pointed to the case of one soldier who "had been due to leave the Army just two days after the order was given, but was instead told to draw his gear and prepare for 12 months in the desert. And as stressful as these orders are for the soldiers, imagine what their families are feeling."

The *New York Times* cites the comment of Loren Thompson, a military analyst: "The army is running out of creative ideas for coping with the level of commitment that Iraq requires. It's clear there was a fundamental miscalculation about how protracted and how intense the ground commitment in Iraq would be."

One of those "creative ideas" is to activate portions of the pool of former soldiers who, after four years of active duty, remain on the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) list. These are men and women who no longer receive pay or training and consider themselves all but civilians, but legally owe the army another four years on the IRR. Joseph Galloway, senior military correspondent for Knight Ridder Newspapers—in "Stressed US Army desperate for warm bodies"—writes that "the Army could be telling as many as 6,500 folks who thought they were home free—finished with their enlistments and back on civvy street—that they aren't."

Writing in the *Asian Times*, journalist Erich Marquardt observes that with the US Army's ranks "spread thin," the military has come increasingly to rely on reserve and National Guard for combat missions. "The duration and danger now involved in reserve and National Guard deployments has angered many segments of the military, since these soldiers usually have full-time civilian jobs and only perform military training one weekend a month and for two weeks in the summer."

Even the more honest commentary in the media can only hint at the levels of hostility and demoralization that exist within wide layers of the armed forces.

The military has been claiming no drop in enlistment despite the

violence and death in Iraq, but *ABCNEWS.com* Martha Raddatz noted June 2 that the “Pentagon is facing another challenge to manpower: Recruitment is down.” She writes that the “most alarming recruiting decline is in the Air National Guard.” Gen. Peter Pace, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a Senate panel that recruiting was off by 23 percent. “Recruitment overall in the National Guard and the reserves is down several percentage points,” according to Raddatz.

If enlistment has not fallen more sharply, economic factors no doubt come into play. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, based on an analysis of military and US census statistics, has determined that 46 percent of the 800 or so Americans killed in Iraq as of May 26 have come from small towns, “most often, [to] escape economically depressed communities that offer little future, residents and experts say,” writes reporter Ron Harris.

Harris notes that while the army is no longer composed of conscripts, “part of that volunteering is a form of economic conscription,” said David R. Segal, director of the Center for Research on Military Organization at the University of Maryland. ‘They’re not being selected by the Selective Service System; they are being selected by the economy.’

“Thus, in many small towns across America, where unemployment rates run consistently higher than the national average and median household incomes fall below the norm, high school graduates with limited options are pulled in by military economic packages that far outstrip anything that they could earn locally.”

Hagenbeck, the army’s personnel chief, admits to worrying about the ability of the army to continue attracting recruits. His biggest worry “is how mothers, teachers and coaches, who influence the youths’ enlistment decisions, come to think about military service. ‘That’s the one thing I am holding my breath about every day,’ he said.” (*Washington Post*)

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One of the great unmentionables in the current election campaign is the reinstatement of conscription. John Pike of *GlobalSecurity.org*, a think-tank in Washington, told a newspaper reporter that “[Army Chief of Staff Gen. Peter] Schoonmaker doesn’t want to go there [to a draft], but he’s afraid he might have to. They’re really moving the heavy furniture around to find more combat troops.”

The claims by the media and the army that strong support for the Iraq war is encouraging young men and women to enlist in the military are belied by opinion polls that show decreasing support for the war and widespread, if politically diffuse opposition.

Practices adopted recently by unscrupulous National Guard recruiters inadvertently confirm the same trends. Recruiters and Non-Commissioned Officers in the business of retaining soldiers have apparently been telling those on the Individual Ready Reserve to either join Guard units or re-enlist, or they will be “slammed,” i.e., involuntarily assigned to units bound for Iraq or Afghanistan.

Lt. Col. Burt Masters, Human Resources Command spokesperson in St. Louis, told a military web site, “There have been a few cases of recruiters using ‘scare tactics.’ They’ve basically twisted their arms, telling people if you don’t join the National Guard, you’ll go to Iraq.” (Since Guard units are now serving in Iraq in increased numbers, such a move would not prevent deployment to Iraq, in any case.) Two Oregon National Guard recruits were allowed to rescind their enlistments in late May, after authorities learned they had been pressured in this manner.

The tactics have been used nationwide. Greg Daniel, a 25-year-old

student in the radiology department at Southern Illinois University Carbondale and an X-ray technician at St. Joseph Memorial Hospital in Murphysboro, Illinois, explained to a southern Illinois newspaper that he had almost signed up for 18 months of service with a reserve unit because of such “scare tactics.”

“That letter almost turned my life upside down,” Daniel said. “I called my director at school and told him I was getting activated and I was probably going to have to drop out of school. I told the hospital I was going to have to quit.”

As for the mood in the army itself, retired US Army Col. David Hackworth, a vocal critic of the Pentagon and the White House, suggests the reality is “exactly 180 degrees out” from what official sources are saying about re-enlistment rates. He asserts, based on “what hundreds of soldiers have told me during the past few weeks,” that troops “are voting with their feet” and preparing to leave the military in large numbers.

Hackworth cites the comment of a Special Forces (SF) noncommissioned officer (NCO): “Stop loss is not only a breach of contract, it’s a form of slavery. There’s a tidal wave of folks getting out. ... The number of senior SF NCOs leaving is amazing. Our battalion had three of five sergeant majors retire, and our sister battalion had two of five. The number of master sergeants was well into double digits. I predict that the exodus will devastate the senior NCO corps at a time when experience and stability are most needed.”

Hackworth goes on: “Despite all the accentuate-the-positive spin coming out of the Pentagon, the anecdotal reports I’ve received—especially from Reserve and National Guard folks—agree with the SF sergeant and point to a mass exodus that will reach the hemorrhage point by mid-2005.”

US imperialism has embarked on a course of attempting to use its military superiority to establish global domination. This has the inevitable consequence of radicalizing not only the peoples that stand in its way, like the Iraqis, but wide layers of the American population, who will be told they must pay the cost.



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