

US troops confront Defense Secretary Rumsfeld

Bill Van Auken
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Mounting discontent among US troops in Iraq spilled over Wednesday as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld addressed 1,800 soldiers preparing to deploy to the country from Camp Buehring, a desert base that serves as a staging area in neighboring Kuwait.

At a “town hall” question-and-answer session, rank-and-file soldiers challenged Rumsfeld about the state of their equipment as well as the involuntary service being imposed on military personnel whose enlistments expire, but are forced to stay in Iraq.

A member of the Tennessee Army National Guard was loudly cheered by the assembled troops when he posed a defiant question to Rumsfeld about the failure of the Pentagon to supply fully armored vehicles to many of those deployed in the Iraqi occupation.

“Why do we soldiers have to dig through local landfills for pieces of scrap metal and compromised ballistic glass to up-armor our vehicles?” Army Specialist Thomas Wilson demanded.

Rumsfeld feigned that he did not understand the question, and the soldier amplified on his complaint.

“Our soldiers have been fighting in Iraq for coming up to three years. A lot of us are getting ready to move north pretty soon,” said Wilson.

“Our vehicles are not armored. We are digging up pieces of rusting scrap metal and compromised ballistic glass that has already been shot up, dropped, busted, picking the best for our vehicles to take into combat. We do not have proper armor on our vehicles to carry with us north.”

Rumsfeld’s response summed up Washington’s contempt not only for the tens of thousands of Iraqis who have been killed since the March 2003 invasion, but also for the US soldiers sent to kill and die there as well.

Dismissing the widespread complaints by soldiers forced to conduct patrols in unarmored Humvees, Rumsfeld responded, “If you think about it, you can have all the armor in the world on a tank and a tank can be blown up. And you can have an up-armored Humvee and it can be blown up.”

US combat deaths topped 1,000 this week. (The total number of US fatalities in Iraq has risen to at least 1,276). Nearly 10,000 more have been wounded. According to most estimates, nearly half of these casualties are the result of roadside bombs—known in military jargon as IEDs (improvised explosive devices)—ripping through soldiers’ vehicles, in many cases severing limbs or inflicting severe head injuries.

What Specialist Wilson reported about soldiers combing scrap yards for material to fortify their vehicles has become commonplace in Iraq. Some troops have resorted to adding plywood and even sandbags in their attempts to jerry-rig the Humvees with homemade armor.

Rumsfeld claimed that the Pentagon is pushing defense contractors to speed up production of the armored Humvees. He exonerated the Bush administration and his own

Defense Department civilian command for the military’s unpreparedness, declaring, “As you know, you go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time.”

The reality is that the administration launched a “war of choice,” an act of aggression carried out at a time of its own choosing. It did not equip the military with armored vehicles and other basic supplies because it believed its own ideologically driven prognosis that the Iraqi people would welcome the US invasion and occupation as their “liberation.”

While estimates drawn up before the invasion indicated that the military would need just 800 fully armored Humvees, commanders now put the number at 6,000.

The US military has faced a rapidly intensifying resistance, with attacks on occupation troops increasing from just 20 a day a year ago to now well over 100. US casualties are also rising, with November being the most deadly month yet, with 136 US soldiers killed.

In response, Washington is beefing up the occupation force with another 12,000 troops, bringing the total within the next few weeks to 150,000. It is widely predicted that this number will only grow larger in the coming months.

As a result, the US military is stretched to the breaking point, and the Pentagon is taking extraordinary—and deeply unpopular—measures to find an adequate number of troops to deploy in Iraq.

Rumsfeld was clearly flustered when a second soldier rose and demanded to know what the Pentagon was doing “to address shortages and antiquated equipment that National Guard soldiers ... are going to roll into Iraq with?” The soldier charged that regular Army units are receiving better equipment than reservists and National Guard troops, who make up some 40 percent of the occupation force.

“Now settle down, settle down. Hell, I’m an old man, and it’s early in the morning. I’m just gathering my thoughts here,”

Rumsfeld, 72, told his audience at Camp Buehring.

Another soldier pointedly began her question by telling Rumsfeld, “My husband and myself both joined a volunteer Army. Currently, I’m serving under the stop-loss.” She added, “I would like to know how much longer you foresee the military using this program.”

Under the military’s stop-loss provision, soldiers on active duty who have fulfilled the obligations of their enlistment or who are eligible to retire can be prevented from doing so on the grounds of war-time emergency. These involuntary extensions of duty compel soldiers already deployed in Iraq to remain there until their entire unit is withdrawn, and serve another 90 days after they return to the US. In some cases, this can amount to an extra year-and-a-half of forced military service.

At least 7,000 troops are being held in Iraq under stop-loss, according to one estimate. At least 10,000 more who were promised that they would be home before Christmas are having their tours of duty extended.

Pentagon officials routinely claim that the use of stop-loss is designed to maintain “unit cohesion” by keeping experienced personnel in the field. It has become increasingly obvious, however, that the use of this draconian procedure is a desperate response to the lack of sufficient troops.

According to reports from within the military, recruitment has fallen precipitously in recent months, with current figures indicating recruiters are meeting barely 50 percent of their goal for the current fiscal year. The drop-off is across the board, from regular Army to National Guard units.

Anger over the stop-loss orders has given rise to a lawsuit by eight US soldiers ordered to remain in Iraq after they had fulfilled their commitments to the military. The suit, filed Monday, charges that the soldiers were lured into the military under false pretenses, because the information they were given and papers they signed made no mention of the provision allowing the government to extend their military service.

The only named plaintiff in the case, Specialist David Qualls, went into the National Guard under a special program known as “Try One,” which allows veterans to serve for one year on a trial basis and then leave. He is currently home on leave but facing orders to return to Iraq. The other seven plaintiffs have remained anonymous for fear that revealing their identity would subject them to retaliation by the military, including receiving more dangerous assignments.

“The Army made an agreement with me and I expected them to honor it,” said Qualls. “Iraq is a very dangerous place and I have a family to support. I did what I said I would; it’s only fair that the Army do the same.”

Qualls has suffered an 80-percent drop in income since his deployment to Iraq, and his family has been unable to meet payments on its home or cars. His wife applied for a hardship discharge for her husband, testifying that both she and their daughter are taking medication for stress caused by his extended absence.

The suit charges that the stop-loss policy constitutes a fraud against those induced to join the military and represents a breach of contract.

In a related development, the US military command in Baghdad announced Monday that it has ordered minor punishment for 23 South Carolina Army Reserve soldiers who last October refused an order to drive unarmored fuel and water tankers through an area where attacks by the Iraqi resistance were common. The troops described the order as a “suicide mission.”

The soldiers were punished under Article 15 of the Code of Military Justice, a measure reserved for minor disciplinary infractions, with penalties such as the docking of pay, extra duty or a reduction in rank.

The US military command said that 18 of the soldiers had already been disciplined, while five others are awaiting the determination of their penalties.

The same military justice code describes what the reservists did—refusing “in concert with any other person, to obey orders” in time of war—as mutiny, an offense that demands a full court martial and carries severe penalties, up to and including death.

That the Pentagon chose to forgo a court martial is telling. What moved the South Carolina reservists to disobey orders were the same concerns and sentiments expressed by the soldiers who challenged Rumsfeld in Kuwait.

There were indications that their action enjoyed widespread sympathy within the military ranks. “There are troops who support you and believe you did the right thing,” one soldier in Kuwait wrote to the newspaper *Stars and Stripes*. “You took a stand, not just for yourselves, but for every member of the military.”

Another soldier, a sergeant stationed in the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk, wrote to the newspaper: “Someone should be punished for not completing the fuel supply mission. But the people that may need to be punished aren’t the drivers of the supply trucks...Why didn’t the convoy have the equipment the soldiers needed to be safe until they decided to put their feet down? Those soldiers will definitely set a precedent.”

It is precisely such a “precedent” that the Bush administration and the Pentagon leadership fear. The growing signs of dissatisfaction and unrest within the military are the inevitable byproduct of a war launched without provocation that has become a protracted colonial-style counterinsurgency campaign against a population overwhelmingly opposed to foreign occupation.

The last such campaign waged by the US was in Vietnam, and it led to the wholesale breakdown of discipline and morale within the Army. With the immense strains placed upon it—and the realization among a growing number of troops that the war was unjustified and launched on the basis of lies—the American military may already be headed for a similar crackup in Iraq.



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