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A troop readiness crisis

By Lawrence Korb | April 11, 2007

PROPOSERS and opponents of the amendments to the war supplemental bill that has now passed both houses of Congress have focused on the provision that sets a timetable for withdrawal. They are concerned about the potential signals it would have on the insurgents as well as our moral obligation to the Iraqi people. But another provision in the bills concerns our moral obligation to the men and women who are being deployed to Iraq, and it has not received proper attention.

That provision would prevent the president from sending Army units into Iraq and Afghanistan that have not spent at least a year at home since returning from the combat zone. President Bush argues that, with this provision, Congress is trying to micromanage the war by telling US generals how to run a war and vows that he will veto it.

But the president's reasoning is flawed. Bush already has leeway because Army doctrine says that troops should spend at least two years at home before being sent back to a war zone for another year. Moreover, this proposed law is entirely consistent with Congress's constitutional responsibility to provide for the common defense and regulate land and naval forces. Finally, the provision gives the president the power to waive the law if he deems it is in the national interest.

But more importantly, Bush needs to address the issue of why Army doctrine mandates that units spend two years at home between deployments -- one year of recuperation followed by one year of training -- and why Congress is insisting that units spend at least one year at home. The answer is that it takes two years for a unit to attain a readiness level of C-1, or ready for the full wartime mission, and at least one year to become C-3 or even marginally combat ready. Of the 20 Army combat brigades in or on their way to Iraq or Afghanistan, none has been home for two years and four have not been home for a year. One unit, the 4th Infantry Division Headquarters from Fort Hood, Texas, will return to Iraq after about seven months at home. None of the units was rated fully or even substantially combat ready (C-2) when deployed.

Looking at the situation for three units that are part of this surge shows what happens when units do not receive what the Army calls the proper dwell time between deployments. The 1st Brigade of the Army's 3rd Infantry Division based at Fort Stewart became the Army's first brigade to be deployed to Iraq for the third time, when it was sent over in January 2007 after about a year at home. But, because of its compressed time between deployments, some 150 soldiers joined the unit right out of basic training, too late to participate in the training necessary to prepare units to function effectively in Iraq. Unfortunately one of the 18-year-old soldiers who joined the unit on Dec. 18, 2006 has already been killed.

Or take the 4th Brigade of the Army's 1st Infantry Division, based at Fort Reilly, which was sent to Iraq in February, about a year after it was reactivated. More than half of the brigade's soldiers in the E-4 and below rank are right out of basic training and the bulk of its midlevel non commissioned officers in the ranks of E-5 and E-6 have no combat experience.

The 3rd Division's 3rd Brigade was sent back to Iraq this month for the third time, after less than 11 months at home. To keep its numbers up it has had to send some 75 soldiers with medical problems into the war zone.

Yes, the United States does have a moral obligation to the Iraqis. That is why the House and Senate bills allow us to remain there until at least five years after the invasion. But we also have a moral obligation to those who volunteer to protect us not to put them in harm's way in a war of choice. It's rather ironic that Bush, who said in the 2000 campaign that the military was facing a grave readiness crisis, should complain about the congressional attempt to ensure that our troops are ready before sending them into battle.

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