

**Testimony of
Lawrence J. Korb**

**Before the
Senate Armed Services Committee
April 17, 2007**

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Chairman Levin, Ranking Member McCain, and members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you with these genuine war heroes to discuss the current state of the nation's ground forces. I cannot think of a more critical issue facing the nation at this time.

After more than four years of being engaged in combat operations in Iraq and six and a half in Afghanistan, America's ground forces are stretched to their breaking point. Not since the aftermath of the Vietnam War has the U.S. Army been so depleted. In Iraq, about 3,300 troops have been killed and another 24,000 wounded. The Army is severely overstretched and its overall readiness has significantly declined. As General Colin Powell noted in December even before the surge, the active Army is about broken, and as General Barry McCaffrey has noted the ground forces are in a position of strategic peril. The Marine Corps is suffering from the same strains as the Army, and the situation for the Army National Guard is even worse. The decision to escalate or to "surge" more ground troops into Iraq will only put additional strain on the ground forces and threatens to leave the United States with a broken force that is unprepared to deal with other threats around the world.

Army and Marine commanders will only be able to provide these additional troops by cutting corners on training and equipment and by putting additional stress on those in uniform. The unprecedented decision by Secretary Gates last week, that tours for Army brigades would be extended from 12 months to 15 months, is something that was not even done in Vietnam when we had over 500,000 troops on the ground or in Korea where we had over 300,000. This only further demonstrates the dire situation that the Army is facing.

Meanwhile, the combat readiness of the total Army (active units, the National Guard, and the Army Reserve) is in tatters. General Peter Pace, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, conducted his own review of the military and concluded that there has been an overall decline in military readiness and that there is a significant risk that the U.S. military would not be able to respond effectively if it were confronted with another crisis. The simple fact is that the United States currently does not have enough troops who are ready and available for potential contingency missions in Iran, North Korea, or anywhere else. For example, when this surge is completed all four brigades of the 82nd Airborne will be deployed, leaving us with no strategic ground reserve. Even at the height of the Korean War, we always have kept one brigade in the continental United States. But it is not simply that so many of our soldiers are committed to Iraq, but that so much of the Army's and the Marine Corps' equipment is committed to Iraq as well.

In the following four sections I will discuss the misuse of the all-volunteer military in Iraq, the personnel and equipment challenges confronting the ground forces, and in the final section I will make some recommendations for rebuilding and expanding the ground forces.

I. Iraq and the All-Volunteer Military.

The current use of the ground forces in Iraq represents a complete misuse of the all-volunteer military. America's all-volunteer Army, made up of well-equipped and highly trained active-duty soldiers, backed up by a ready reserve, was designed to act as an initial response force, a force that would be able to repel and counter aggression. If America ever found itself in a long protracted ground war, or was forced to act against an existential threat, the all-volunteer force was to act as a bridge to re-instating conscription. This is why we require young men to register when they turn 18.

The all-volunteer force, particularly the Army component, as General John Abizaid noted last fall, was not "built to sustain a long war." Therefore, if the United States is going to have a significant component of its ground forces in Iraq over the next 5, 10, 15, or 30 years, then the responsible course is for the president and those supporting this open-ended and escalated presence in Iraq to call for re-instating the draft. That would be the responsible path.

In my view, however, this would be a mistake on par with the initial invasion of Iraq. Instead, I believe the United States should set a firm timetable for the gradual redeployment of U.S. forces over the next 18 months. During that time the United States should work to train and support Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi government while gradually handing over responsibility for security to the Iraqis. This action should be backed up with a diplomatic surge in which the United States would engage all countries in the region. There is no guarantee that this approach will be effective in stabilizing Iraq or the region. In fact, given the misleading justifications for the initial invasion and the way in which the Bush administration has conducted the war, there are no good options left. But I believe that this course, a strategic redeployment and a diplomatic surge, provides the best chance for stabilizing the region as well as mitigating the impact of Iraq on the ground forces and U.S. national security. As General Maxwell Taylor noted some three decades ago, "we sent the Army to Vietnam to save Vietnam; we withdrew the Army to save the Army." The same is even more true for Iraq today.

II. Ground Forces Overstretched

Following Sept. 11, the Bush administration had a tremendous opportunity to increase the size of the ground forces. Unfortunately, the president and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld pursued a misguided and naïve policy. Instead of increasing the size of the ground forces they actually sought to cut them. This error was compounded when the Bush administration diverted its efforts from Afghanistan and proceeded to undertake an ill-advised invasion of Iraq. This strategic mistake has allowed the Taliban to reconstitute in Afghanistan, weakened the standing of the United States in the world, and has undermined the nation's efforts in the fight against the radical extremists responsible for the attacks on 9/11.

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Today there is little doubt that the ground forces are overstretched. In early March, we at the Center for American Progress released a study chronicling the effects that sustained deployments in Iraq are having on the Army.¹ By analyzing every Army brigade we were able to convey the strain and fatigue placed on the force and illustrate its implications for our nation's national security. The facts that we compiled are troubling:

Of the Army's 44 combat brigades, all but the First Brigade of the Second Infantry Division, which is permanently based in South Korea, have served at least one tour. Of the remaining 43:

- 12 Brigades have had one tour in Iraq or Afghanistan
- 20 Brigades have had two tours in Iraq or Afghanistan
- 9 Brigades have had three tours in Iraq or Afghanistan
- 2 Brigades have had four tours in Iraq or Afghanistan

Additionally, the task of sustaining or increasing troop levels in Iraq has forced the Army to frequently violate its own deployment policy. Army policy holds that after 12 months of deployment in a combat zone, troops should receive 24 months at home for recuperation and retraining before returning to combat. Even before the surge, the Army had reduced dwell time to one year. Increasing troop levels in Iraq will only force the Army to place more strain on those serving. In fact, on April 2 the Pentagon announced that two units will be sent back to Iraq without even a year at home. Extending deployments and shortening dwell time cause havoc on the lives of those serving in uniform.

It is also wrong, both militarily and morally, to send troops into a war zone who are not fully combat ready. Three units that are part of this surge show 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. 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 soldiers to function effectively in Iraq. Unfortunately one of the 18-year-old soldiers, Matthew Zeimer, who joined the unit on Dec. 18, 2006, was killed on Feb. 2 after being at his first combat post for just two hours. He missed the brigade's intensive four-week pre-Iraq training at the national training center at Fort Irwin, California, getting instead a cut rate 10-day course.
- The 4th Brigade of the Army's 1st Infantry Division based at Fort Reilly was sent to Iraq in February, about a year after it was reactivated. More than half of the brigade's soldiers classified as E-4 or below and are right out of basic training and

¹ Lawrence Korb, Peter Rundlet, Max Bergmann, Sean Duggan, and Peter Juul, "Beyond the Call of Duty: A Comprehensive Review of the Overuse of the Army in Iraq," Center for American Progress, March 2006.

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the bulk of its mid-level 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 spending less than 11 months at home. In order to meet personnel requirements the brigade sent some 75 soldiers with medical problems into the war zone. These include troops with serious injuries and other medical problems, including GIs who doctors have said are medically unfit for battle. Medical records show that some are too injured to wear their body armor. According to Steve Robinson of Veterans for America, “this smacks of an overstretched military that is in crisis mode to get people onto the battlefield.”

The strain on personnel and the difficulty of recruiting new soldiers in the midst of an unpopular war has prompted the Army to relax many of its standards and dramatically increase enlistment and recruitment bonuses.

While overall retention is good, the Army is keeping its numbers up by increasing financial incentives and allowing soldiers to reenlist early. Worryingly, however, retention among West Point graduates is declining and the Army's personnel costs continue to increase. Spending on enlistment and recruitment bonuses tripled from \$328 million before the war in Iraq to over \$1 billion in 2006. The incentives for Army Guard and Reserve have grown ten-fold over the same period.

After failing to meet its recruitment target for 2005, the Army raised the maximum age for enlistment from 35 to 40 in January—only to find it necessary to raise it to 42 in June. Basic training, an essential tool for developing and training new recruits, has increasingly become a rubber-stamping ritual. Through the first six months of 2006, only 7.6 percent of new recruits failed basic training, down from 18.1 percent in May 2005.

Alarming, this drop in boot-camp attrition coincides with a lowering of recruitment standards. The number of Army recruits who scored below average on its aptitude test doubled in 2005, and the Army has doubled the number of non-high school graduates it enlisted last year. In 2006, only 81 percent of the new enlistees have high school diplomas, compared to 94 percent before the invasion. Even as more allowances are made, the Government Accountability Office reported that allegations and substantiated claims of recruiter wrongdoing have increased by 50 percent. Last May, for example, the Army signed up an autistic man to become a cavalry scout.

The number of criminal offenders that the Army has allowed in the military—through the granting of “moral waivers” —has also increased significantly. Last year, such waivers were granted to 8,129 men and women—or more than one out of every 10 new Army recruits. That number is up 65 percent since 2003, the year President Bush ordered the invasion of Iraq. In the last three years, more than 125,000 moral waivers have been granted by America's four military services. A senior NCO involved in recruiting and retention summarized the situation well when he told *The New York Times* on April 9, 2007, “We're enlisting more dropouts, people with more law violations, lower test scores,

more moral issues... We're really scraping the bottom of the barrel to get people to join." Private Steven Green, the soldier arrested for his alleged role in the rape of an Iraqi girl and the murder of her family, was allowed to join the Army upon being granted one such moral waiver. Green had legal, educational, and psychological problems, didn't graduate from high school and had been arrested several times.

Most of last year's Army waivers were for serious misdemeanors, like aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, and vehicular homicide. But around 900—double the number in 2003—were for felonies. Worse, the Army does no systematic tracking of recruits with waivers once it signs them up, and it does not always pay enough attention to any adjustment problems.

III. Readiness Crisis.

Currently there are virtually no active or reserve Army combat units outside of Iraq and Afghanistan that are rated as "combat ready." The Army has deployed 20 of its 43 available active-duty combat brigades—meaning that virtually all its forces are either in Iraq or are preparing to return there. In order to ensure that troops fighting in Iraq are fully equipped, units rotating out of Iraq have been leaving behind their equipment for units taking their place. The units that return home are often so depleted that the Marines have been referring to this phase as the 'post-deployment death spiral.'

As a result, combat-readiness worldwide has deteriorated to crisis levels. The equipment in Iraq is wearing out at four to nine times the normal peacetime rate because of combat losses and harsh operating conditions. As we have documented in studies done in coordination with the Lexington Institute, the total Army—active and reserve—now faces at least a \$50 billion equipment shortfall and the Marines about \$15 billion.² Without equipment, it's extremely difficult for non-deployed units to train for combat. Thus, one of the hidden effects of the Iraq war is that even the troops not currently committed to Iraq are weakened because of it.

To equip those on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Army and the Marines have been drawing down their pre-positioned equipment stocks around the globe. These stocks are stored on ships or in strategic locations around the world to enable deploying units to be supplied rapidly. These stocks have been extensively diminished and limit the ability of the United States to respond to possible crises around the world. For instance, the Marine Corps has drawn down their pre-positioned reserve equipment stocks in the Pacific and Europe by up to 70 percent. The Army and Marines have been so overstretched that the United States has almost no ready reserve of ground forces to effectively deal with a potential crisis on the Korean peninsula, in Iran, or in unstable Pakistan, for example, or to help alleviate the grave humanitarian crisis in Darfur.

² Lawrence J. Korb, Loren B. Thompson, Caroline P. Wadhams, "Army Equipment After Iraq," Center for American Progress and the Lexington Institute, April 2006; Lawrence J. Korb, Loren B. Thompson, Max A. Bergmann, "Marine Corps Equipment After Iraq," Center for American Progress and the Lexington Institute, August 2006.

The reserve component is also in tatters. Lt. General Steven Blum, the head of the National Guard Bureau, stated that the National Guard is “in an even more dire situation than the active Army but both have the same symptoms; I just have a higher fever.” The Pentagon has had to increasingly employ the National Guard and Reserve in order to meet demands on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Both the Army Guard and Reserve began the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq with their units short tens of thousands of soldiers, or about 15 to 20 percent, and lacking more than 30 percent of their necessary gear. Those shortages have deepened as people and equipment are borrowed from units staying home to fill out those about to go overseas. According to Lt. Gen. Clyde A. Vaughn, Chief of the Army National Guard, what the Guard is trying to deal with right now is “a situation where we have absolutely piecemealed our force to death.”

To make matters worse, the Pentagon is set to notify National Guard brigades to prepare again for duty in Iraq. Some 12,000 troops are scheduled to be deployed to Iraq early next year. This would be the first time that full Guard combat brigades would be sent to Iraq for a second tour. These deployments are becoming increasingly necessary because the regular Army is not large enough to handle the mission in Iraq on its own. Originally these Guard units were to serve no more than 24 months total. However, these units and others in the Guard have already served 18 months—with training time and time in Iraq or Afghanistan—and now they are looking at least another 12 months in Iraq.

IV. Expanding and Rebuilding the Ground Forces

Secretary Gates’ decision to expand the Army and Marines is long overdue. At the Center for American Progress we have been calling for such an expansion for the past four years. However, the difficult situation facing the Army and the Marines requires a long-term approach toward expanding and rebuilding the ground forces. Increasing the size of the Army and Marines will not help the situation on the ground in Iraq. Instead, growing these forces is about preparing America’s military for the future. I have the following recommendations:

Don’t Lower Standards. The Army and Marines should meet their new end-strength goals without relaxing recruitment standards or retention and promotion criteria. In order to ensure the Army and Marines continue to get the best and the brightest, the current target of adding 7,000 soldiers and 5,000 marines per year is too ambitious in light of current circumstances and should be scaled back. Recruitment and retention standards should return to at least pre-Iraq standards. Congress must make sure that the quality of U.S. military personnel does not slide as it did in the 1970s. It is worth waiting a few extra years to ensure that the Army and Marines attract the men and women who possess the specialized skill sets needed for an effective 21st-century military.

Expand with a Focus on Peacekeeping and Counterinsurgency Operations.

Following the war in Vietnam, instead of building off the experience of fighting an unconventional force, the military adopted the mantra of “no more Vietnams” and shifted its focus back to confronting conventional threats. We cannot make this same mistake today. It is clear going forward that America’s ground forces have to be prepared to engage an entire spectrum of operations, from conventional ground combat to humanitarian and peacekeeping operations. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown that while our ground forces remain conventionally unmatched, there is significant room for improvement in our ability to conduct counterinsurgency and peacekeeping operations. In my view, the U.S. Army should consider developing specialized “peacekeeping” or “stabilization and reconstruction” brigades. Such specialized brigades would alter both the type of recruit the Army is seeking and the type of person who might be interested in joining the Army. It is important, therefore, that the decision about whether to create specialized brigades of this sort be made as soon as possible.

Grow the Forces in a Fiscally Responsible Manner. Growing the ground forces is an expensive endeavor. The current average annual cost of maintaining a single service member already exceeds \$100,000. Currently the defense budget is severely unbalanced. Despite claims that 9/11 changed everything, during Secretary Rumsfeld’s tenure only two weapons systems were canceled. Many of the current weapons programs are unnecessary relics that were borne out of Cold War-era thinking. The challenge confronting the Army and Marines in terms of both escalating personnel costs and the deepening equipment crisis requires significant congressional attention and funding. Expanding the ground forces and recovering from Iraq and Afghanistan should be the overriding priority of the defense budget.

Open up the Military to all Americans who Possess the Desire, Talent and Character to Serve. The Army and Marine Corps cannot afford to place unnecessary obstacles in the way of qualified men and women who want to serve. To this end, the military should make two major changes to its personnel policy.

- First, repeal the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. The “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy is counterproductive to military readiness. Over the past 10 years more than 10,000 personnel have been discharged as a result of this policy, including 800 with skills deemed “mission critical,” such as pilots, combat engineers, and linguists. These are the very job functions for which the military has experienced personnel shortfalls. General John M. Shalikashvili, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1993 when the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy was enacted, no longer supports the policy on the grounds that allowing gay men and women to serve openly in the military would no longer create intolerable tension among personnel and undermine cohesion. Additionally, a recent Zogby poll supports this view. It found that three-quarters of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans were comfortable interacting with gay people.

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- Second, all military occupations should be open to whoever qualifies, regardless of gender. Currently, the Army prohibits women from serving in infantry, field artillery, and Special Forces units that directly engage the enemy on the ground. The idea that women who possess the requisite mental and physical skills should somehow be “protected” from the dangers of combat fails to acknowledge the reality of the modern battlefield and the role women are already playing in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nearly a hundred women have been killed in these wars. We only impede our ability to build a 21st-century military by constructing barriers where none need exist.

Twenty-six years ago I was fortunate enough to be confirmed by this committee to assume responsibility for the readiness of the Armed Forces. Because of Vietnam and its immediate aftermath, this nation had what the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army called a “hollow army.” With the help of Congress, and in particular this committee, we were able to reverse this situation. Successive administrations and Congresses continued to maintain the quality of the force. It is hard to believe that the Bush administration has allowed the readiness of our ground forces to deteriorate so rapidly in so short a time. I urge the Congress and this committee to take the initiative in fixing the problem.