

updated for 2008

Reality Check

Legions Stretched Thin

The
U.S. Army's
Manpower
Crisis

A CENTURY FOUNDATION GUIDE TO THE ISSUES



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Legions Stretched Thin

The U.S. Army's Manpower Crisis

The U.S. military is facing demands that are more wide-ranging and intensive than at any time since the end of the Vietnam War. But evidence is mounting that the armed forces lack the manpower to meet those challenges. The occupation of Iraq, a major ongoing operation in Afghanistan, homeland security missions in the continental United States, and peacekeeping efforts around the globe are straining the all-volunteer military's capacity to defend America's strategic interests and prepare for other potential contingencies.

The army—including active-duty army, the army reserves, and the National Guard—contributes the vast majority of “boots on the ground” in U.S. deployments, which is cause for particular concern. The number of active-duty army troops is at its lowest since before World War II, while the war in Iraq has necessitated the largest mobilization of army reserves and National Guard units since 1950.¹

Nearly 1.7 million U.S. service members have been deployed to either Iraq or Afghanistan since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and of those 1.7 million, almost 600,000 have been deployed more than once. Back-to-back deployments with an insufficient amount of time at home, or “dwell time,” between deployments for training have decreased troop readiness. General George W. Casey, Jr., the army chief of staff, recently acknowledged the toll that increasing demand

1. “Reed, Hagel Will Introduce Bill to Increase the Size of the Army,” press release, office of U.S. Senator Jack Reed, February 17, 2005, available online at <http://reed.senate.gov/newsroom/details.cfm?id=257263>.

is taking on the limited supply of troops, characterizing today's army as "out of balance."²

There is little prospect that the demands on the military will ease in the foreseeable future. After years of resisting calls to expand the army, President Bush announced the "Grow the Force" initiative in January 2007, a measure that would permanently increase the size of the army by 74,200 troops to create a force of 547,000 troops. The hope is that a larger army will relieve some of the current pressure on ground forces.

However, as the Department of Defense pushes forward with the plan to grow the army, recruitment and retention statistics and morale surveys indicate that meeting goals for enlistment in the army, the reserves, and the National Guard will be a challenge. In order to fill its ranks, the army has already resorted to lowering its recruitment standards and offering larger financial bonuses for enlistment.

The potential for a serious deterioration in force readiness has prompted calls from across the ideological spectrum for a variety of solutions, including a drastic reduction in U.S. deployments abroad, a reinstatement of the draft, and requiring soldiers who were scheduled to be discharged to remain involuntarily on active duty.

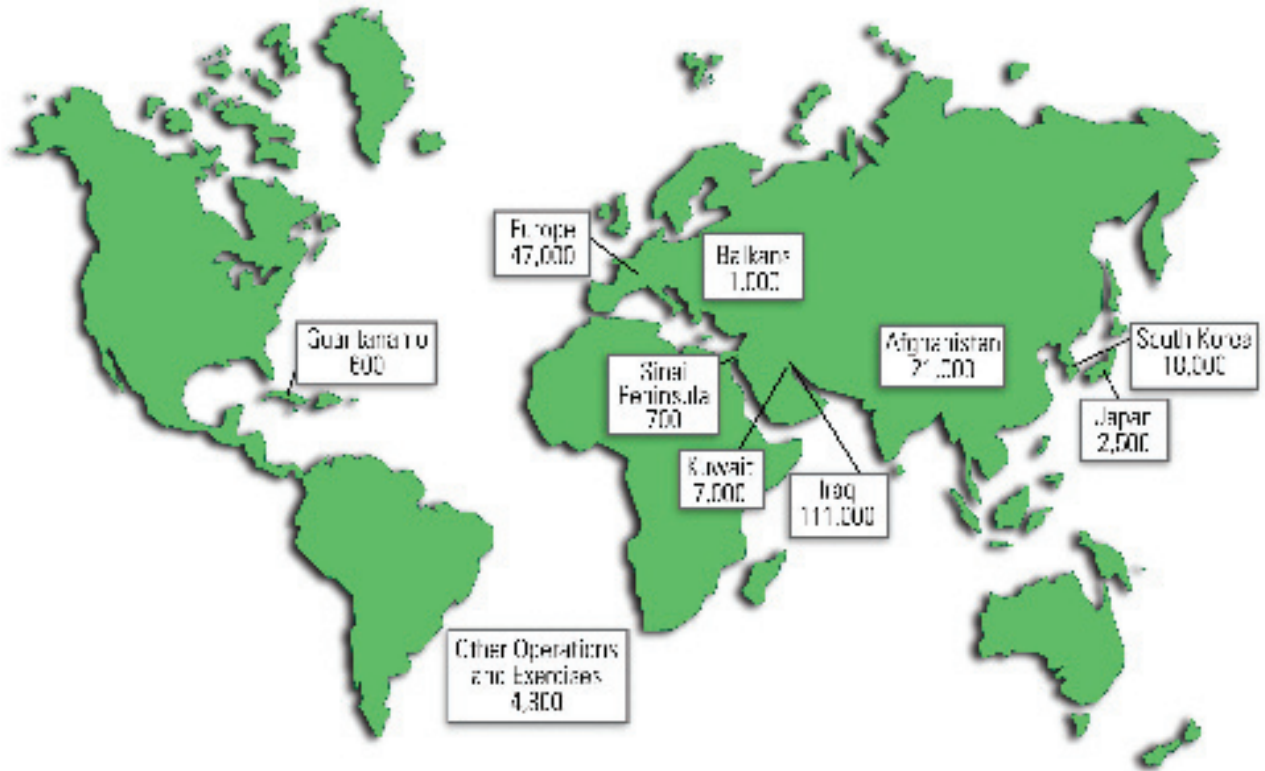
All Over the Map

As shown in Figure 1, the U.S. Army is dug in deeply around the globe.

2. "Maintaining Quality in the Force: A Briefing by General George W. Casey, Jr." The Brookings Institution, December 4, 2007, available online at http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2007/1204_casey/20071204casey.pdf.

Figure 1. Army Global Commitments

251,000 soldiers overseas in 80 countries



Source: "2008 Army Posture Statement," U.S. Army, February 26, 2008, available online at <http://www.army.mil/aps/08/>.

In December 2001, slightly more than 100,000 army personnel were stationed abroad, mostly serving in long-standing deployments in continental Europe and Korea. By contrast, the army today has more than 251,000 soldiers deployed overseas, primarily in the Persian Gulf, Europe, South Korea, and Afghanistan.³

Over the course of nearly seven years of continuous battle, thirty-eight of the army's forty-four active combat brigades have deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan at least twice, and many have deployed three or four times.⁴ This pace of operations is extremely high by the standards of recent history.

Figure 2 shows that the share of active-duty army troops deployed overseas today has more than doubled when compared to the period immediately preceding the invasion of Iraq.

From a longer-term perspective, as Figure 3 shows, today's active-duty army is substantially smaller than it was throughout the cold war and even during the first Persian Gulf War in 1990. A historical comparison of deployment statistics reveals that the current number of soldiers deployed overseas is disproportionately high given the total size of the army's active duty component. For example, in 1991, about 238,000 soldiers of an approximate total strength level of 711,000 active-duty army personnel were deployed overseas. Although the size of the active-duty army has since decreased to 524,000 soldiers, the current number of troops deployed overseas exceeds 1991 levels by 13,000.

3. See "2008 Army Posture Statement," U.S. Army, February 26, 2008, available online at <http://www.army.mil/aps/08/>.

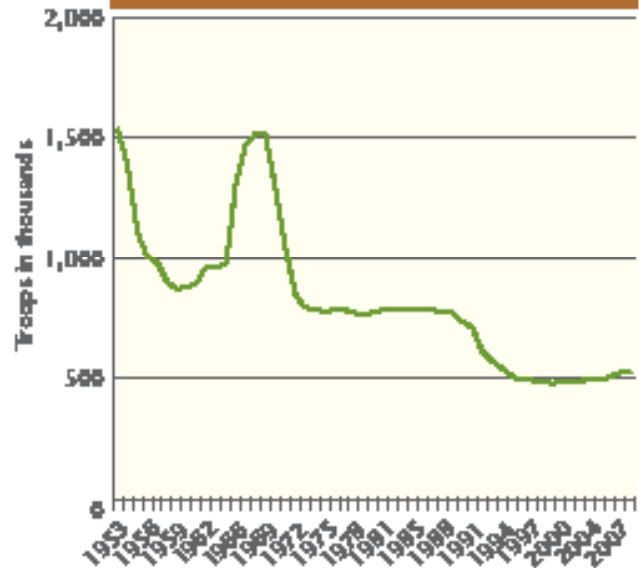
4. Lawrence J. Korb, "The State of America's Ground Forces," Testimony Before the House Committee on Armed Services," April 6, 2008, available online at http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/04/military_readiness.html.

Figure 2. Active U.S. Army Troops Deployed Overseas



Source: "Military Personnel Statistics," Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, Washington Headquarters Services, U.S. Department of Defense, available online at <http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/MILITARY/Miltop.htm>.

Figure 3. Active-Duty Army Personnel Strength Levels



Source: "Military Personnel Statistics," Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, Washington Headquarters Services, U.S. Department of Defense, figure available online at <http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/MILITARY/Miltop.htm>.

*The Army Reserve and National Guard:
No Longer Weekend Warriors*

Over 50 percent of the one million soldiers in the U.S. Army are members of the reserve component, which is made up of the Army Reserve and the Army National Guard.⁵ Reservists are “citizen-soldiers” who hold civilian jobs but train regularly with their reserve units. They are deployed to supplement the active-duty force when necessary.

The National Guard evolved from colonial-era militias and remains organized by state. A state’s guard units can be mobilized by the governor—usually for a disaster response mission—or can be federalized and deployed in support of the U.S. military by the president.

Since September 11, 2001, the Pentagon has relied heavily on reserve and National Guard units. Nearly 600,000 reservists have been mobilized since 2001, and all thirty-four National Guard combat brigades have served at least once in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The number of duty days served by members of the reserve component has increased from 12.7 million in fiscal year 2001 to 61.3 million in fiscal year 2006.⁶

The demand for manpower to meet the needs on the ground has effectively changed the role of the reserve component of the army from a tactical resource to an operational force.

5. “2008 Army Posture Statement,” U.S. Army, February 26, 2008, available online at <http://www.army.mil/aps/08/>.

6. “Transforming the National Guard and Reserves into a 21st-Century Operational Force: Final Report to Congress and the Secretary of Defense,” Commission on the National Guard and Reserves, January 31, 2008, available online at http://www.cngr.gov/Final%20Report/CNGR_final%20report%20with%20cover.pdf.

Private Security Contractors: The New Praetorians?

One consequence of an overstretched military is an increased reliance on private security contractors. The Government Accountability Office estimated that in 2006, as many as 48,000 private security contractors were working in Iraq, the largest force ever used by the United States during a war.⁷ These armed contractors assume responsibilities that include protecting individuals, infrastructure, and transport convoys as well as training Iraqi police and military. Because of the precarious security situation in Iraq, the Pentagon took the unprecedented step of authorizing contractors to use deadly force when performing security duties.

The argument that these hired guns can take on some of the functions of strained troops at a lower cost has been called into question. For example, while it would cost the government \$50,000 to \$70,000 to pay a sergeant in the military, a similar position at a private security firm costs over \$400,000. With the amount of money these private firms receive from government contracts, there is additional concern that they are luring trained soldiers away from the military with the promise of better pay.⁸

Perhaps most alarming is the degree of latitude with which these security contractors are allowed to operate. Although contractors have been taking on roles previously

7. William Solis, "Rebuilding Iraq: Actions Still Needed to Improve the Use of Private Security Providers," Testimony Before the Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations, Committee on Government Reform, U.S. Government Accountability Office, GAO-06-865T, June 13, 2006, available online at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06865t.pdf>.

8. "Hearing on Private Security Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan, Chairman Waxman's Opening Statement," House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, October 2, 2007, available online <http://oversight.house.gov/story.asp?ID=1511>.

limited to soldiers, there has been a surprising lack of regulation and oversight of the private security industry. Contractors operating in Iraq have been accused of using overly aggressive tactics that only further damage the image of Americans when a large part of the mission in Iraq is to gain the trust of the country's citizens.

Calls for establishing a more effective system of accountability governing private security contractors increased after a September 2007 shooting incident involving personnel from Department of State contractor, Blackwater Worldwide, left seventeen Iraqi civilians dead. Currently, only security contractors hired by the Department of Defense can be prosecuted under U.S. law for criminal acts committed overseas. The Senate is now considering legislation already approved by the House of Representatives that would apply U.S. criminal law to all private security contractors, including those contracted by the Department of State.

No Relief in Sight

There is nothing to suggest that the demand for U.S. forces will seriously diminish in the immediate future. A situation of escalating violence and instability in Iraq led President Bush to authorize a temporary "surge" of over 30,000 troops in 2007 to improve security in the country. At the height of the surge, the number of ground forces in Iraq reached 168,000 service members. In order to meet troop demand for the 2007 escalation, the army was forced to extend deployment length from twelve months to fifteen months until August 2008. Although serving longer tours of duty, soldiers have only been granted twelve months of dwell time between deployments. This practice goes against army policy of allotting twenty-four months at home for every twelve months of deployment to allow troops to recover and train.⁹

9. Korb, "The State of America's Ground Forces."

The current pace of operations has taken a heavy human toll on overstressed troops. Repeated and lengthy deployments have contributed to the army's increasing rates of mental health problems, suicide, alcohol abuse, divorce, desertion, and absences without leave (AWOL).¹⁰ A study conducted by the army's Mental Health Advisory Team found that 27 percent of noncommissioned officers who were deployed three or four times showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a significant increase from the 12 percent who exhibited symptoms of the illness after one tour.¹¹ In fact, the diagnosis of PTSD is increasing for all branches of the military (see Figure 4, page 10). In 2007, the number of army suicides reached a record high of 115 soldiers, the highest level since the army began keeping record in 1980.¹²

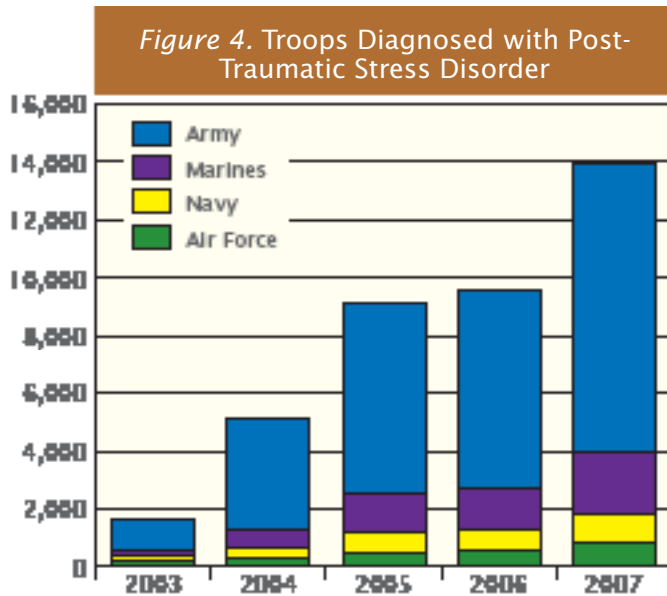
All these factors have created a challenging environment for retaining and recruiting the number of troops needed to sustain military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. In order to retain skilled soldiers, the army is offering an increasing number of incentives, including unprecedented bonuses of up to \$35,000 to captains who agree to extend their service for three years.¹³

10. Michele Flournoy, "Strengthening the Readiness of the U.S. Military," Center for a New American Security, February 2008, available online at <http://www.cnas.org/attachments/contentmanagers/1698/CNAS%20Flournoy%20HASC%20Testimony%20Fact%20Sheet%20February%202008.pdf>.

11. Thom Shanker, "Army Is Worried by Rising Stress of Return Tours to Iraq," *New York Times*, April 6, 2008, available online at http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/06/washington/06military.html?_r=1&oref=slogin.

12. David Morgan, "U.S. Army Suicides Highest in 2007," Reuters, May 29, 2008, available online at <http://www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSN2928543120080530?feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews>.

13. Lisa Burgess, "Army Renews Incentive Program to Improve Retention of Captains," *Stars and Stripes*, April 18, 2008, available online at <http://www.stripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=61487&archive=true>.



Source: "Army Fact Sheet: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," Public Affairs Department, U.S. Army, May 28, 2008.

Beyond efforts to retain troops, the army is actively recruiting new members in order to reach the goal of adding 74,200 new troops by 2010. However, the pressure to increase the number of troops has forced the army to lower its standards for new recruits. For example, the number of recruits who had high school diplomas dropped from 92 percent in 2003 to a twenty-five-year low of 71 percent in 2007.¹⁴ The army has also resorted to granting more "moral waivers" to allow recruits with criminal pasts to serve. The number of waivers grew by 65 percent between 2003 and 2006.¹⁵

In order to fill the gap left by recruiting and voluntary reenlistment shortages, the Department of Defense has been forced to rely on stop-loss orders—mandates from the Pentagon that involuntarily prolong the duties

of service members whose enlistments are expiring. Congress first authorized the Pentagon to issue stop-loss orders after the Vietnam War, but that power was not exercised until the buildup for the Persian Gulf War in 1990. Stop-loss orders were not issued again until November 2002.

As of spring 2008, the Pentagon had issued 58,300 stop-loss orders for army personnel. Although the number of stop-loss orders dropped to a three-year low of

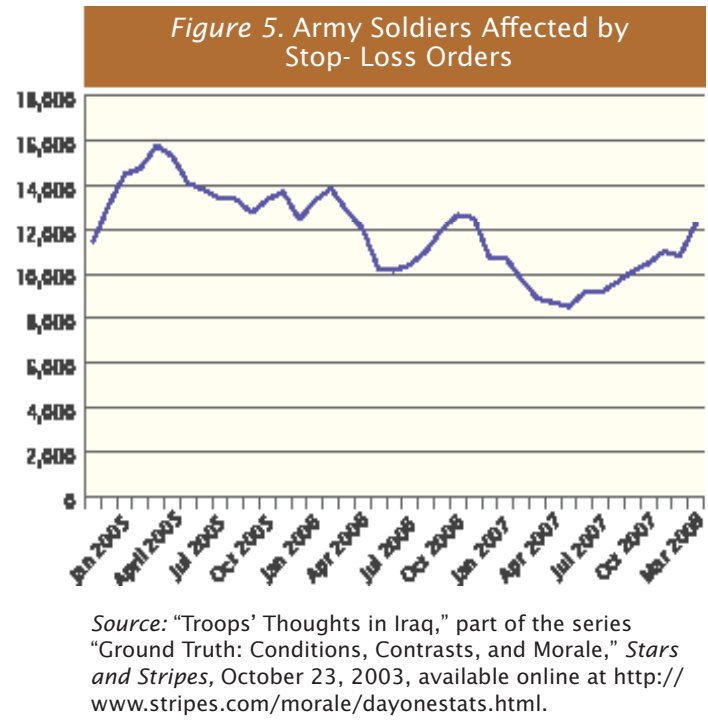
14. Korb, "The State of America's Ground Forces."

8,540 in May 2007, after Secretary of Defense Robert Gates called for a reduction in the number of orders issued, the number increased by 43 percent to 12,235 by March 2008 (see Figure 5). These troops serve an average of 6.6 additional months—further increasing the strain on today's army personnel.

The Policy Options

Brookings Institution defense expert, Peter W. Singer, has written that the challenge for the next commander-in-chief will be to “ensure that the U.S. military does not become broken.”¹⁷ The army's personnel challenge suggests a number of possible policy options:

- ◆ The United States could reduce its commitments around the world and thus ease demand on its military resources. Defense analysts have argued for some time that the “two-front war” readiness doctrine is outdated and needs to be revisited.
- ◆ The administration could work harder to engage international partners, whose forces could be used to supplement ours. Despite the prominence of alliance-



17. Peter W. Singer, “Bent but Not Broken: The Military Challenge for the Next Commander-in-Chief,” Brookings Institution, February 28, 2007, available online at http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2007/~//media/Files/Projects/Opportunity08/PB_MilitaryReadiness_PSingler.pdf.

building in the 2006 National Security Strategy, few would dispute the contention that our major strategic alliances have been weakened over the past eight years.

- ◆ The military can end the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy that, defense expert Lawrence Korb estimates, has led to 10,000 service members being discharged over the past ten years.¹⁸
- ◆ Some members of Congress are exploring the reinstatement of the draft in response to the stress on our current force. In January 2007, Representative Charles Rangel (D-NY) for the second time introduced a bill in the House to revive the draft.

The next administration has an important choice to make. Whether the nation spends more money and expands the army’s ranks, or makes the strategic decision to reduce the number and size of deployments, the resolution of the military’s manpower and readiness problems is central to America’s national security.

18. Korb, “The State of America’s Ground Forces.”

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