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Surge could push troops to the breaking point

By Cindy Williams | January 10, 2007

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION'S proposal to send an additional 20,000 troops to join the 152,000 already in Iraq is unlikely to bring significant improvement to the situation in Iraq, but it is certain to further damage the already beleaguered US ground forces. The surge will push America's all-volunteer force into uncharted territory, and it is not clear how well the troops or the military as an institution can withstand the strain.

The men and women in the Army and Marine Corps today -- many of whom have already served for a year or more in Iraq or Afghanistan -- will bear the brunt, because the Army and Marine Corps cannot grow new troops or units overnight. General Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, says it would take two years just to recruit, train, and equip 10,000 new troops.

Thus to accomplish a surge, the armed forces must look to existing units. Virtually all the nation's active-duty ground-force units, and many from the Guard and Reserve, have already spent a year or more in Iraq or Afghanistan. There are only two ways to get more brigades into Iraq: Extend the deployment of units that are already there, or accelerate the return of units that have been there recently. Temporarily increasing the force in Iraq by 20,000 is likely to require a combination of both. The Bush administration's surge could stress the Army and Marines to the breaking point.

For the individuals affected, extended tours and repeated deployments raise troubling mental-health concerns. Nearly 20 percent of Iraq veterans are already returning home with serious mental-health problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder and brain injuries that may go undiagnosed.

An Army survey released last month suggests that such problems will increase as more soldiers are required to serve in Iraq longer than planned. Soldiers cited the length of deployment and family separation as the top non-combat sources of stress in their lives. Repeated deployments made things much worse; 18 percent of soldiers with at least one earlier deployment said they were under acute stress, compared with 12 percent of those who are on their first tour in Iraq.

The surge will harm the military as an institution as well as the individuals who serve. A tragic consequence of mental-health problems is that the suicide rate among soldiers in Iraq doubled in 2005 (the last year for which data have been published), leaving units to cope with those losses in addition to other casualties of the war.

The surge will also make it difficult for the Army to sustain its current size, let alone expand as the law allows. Uncertainties related to deployment schedules and shortened periods at home play an important role in the decisions soldiers are making about whether to remain in the military as their service obligations end. If given a choice, many soldiers facing a second tour or an extension in Iraq would leave.

Perhaps most troubling for the armed services, back-to-back deployments dull the qualitative edge that is the hallmark of our ground forces. After a tour in Iraq, it takes time for a brigade to replace the

soldiers who have fallen or left service, recuperate, rebuild skills, develop cohesion across the new team, and train for the next demanding mission. Sending Army active-duty units back to Iraq with less than two years at home robs them of the time they need to restore the qualitative edge. Yet to lose that edge risks making mistakes that can have terrible consequences for our troops as well as Iraqi civilians.

To spare the already overburdened active force, the administration may opt instead to accelerate deployment of some Guard or Reserve units. But tapping those units too frequently all but guarantees future problems in attracting and retaining the men and women who volunteer for part-time service, and sustaining the cooperation of the families and civilian employers who support them.

The Army and Marine Corps are already stretched, some say to the breaking point. The troop surge the administration seems set on may be just enough to snap them. Whatever small gains the administration expects to achieve in Iraq from this stop-gap measure hardly seem worth the danger to the health of the nation's all-volunteer force.

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