



## **Ground Down: The Army and Marine Corps are dangerously understrength**

By Gen. Barry R. McCaffrey, U.S. Army (ret.)

The Army and Marine Corps are at risk of experiencing a disaster during the coming three years. There is little reserve or surge capability to respond to new challenges.

In spite of this self-evident truth, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and some of his key civilian leaders argue that there is no personnel shortage — and that manpower increases are both unnecessary and unaffordable. This strategic blindness stems from an ideological viewpoint described best by military historian Frederick Kagan as “a belief that war is all about destroying targets, that ground forces are unnecessary and that technology is supreme.”

The evidence of this real and growing problem, as well as the experience of military history, has been denied or ignored.

By any measure, the ground combat units of the Army and Marines are at their limit. Active duty troop strength has dropped from 2.2 million in 1987 to 1.5 million today. Active-duty Army strength has plummeted from 800,000 in 1988 (and remember, there were more than 1.6 million soldiers during Vietnam) to an authorized level of 482,400.

Today, more than 315,000 soldiers, including reserves, are deployed in more than 120 countries. About 160,000 soldiers assigned to Iraq and Kuwait battle a bitter threat in Iraq. More than 18,000 warriors confront the remnants of the Taliban and are solidifying democracy in Afghanistan. Thousands more stand guard in the Horn of Africa, the Balkans, Guantanamo Bay, South Korea, Okiawa, logistics and air bases in Europe and other regional contingencies across the globe.

The current activated Army force of 640,000 is barely meeting its deployment requirements by heavy reliance on National Guard and Army reservists. The Army Guard has 113,000 troops deployed and the Army Reserve 47,000. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Pete Schoomaker recently testified before a Senate hearing that he’s “committed to providing the troops requested, but I can’t promise more than I’ve got.”

The Marine Corps is similarly stretched to the limit. The nation’s 178,000 Marines have been bolstered by 13,000 reservists. About 25,000 Marines are facing a violent Sunni insurgency in Iraq’s Anbar province. Thousands of other Marines are at sea serving as strategic reserves, or are stationed ashore in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Marine deployments have doubled from two years ago. Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Michael Hagee recently told senators that “the demand on the force has increased exponentially.”

America had 9 percent of its 140 million citizens in uniform during World War II. Compare that to the war on terrorism with less than one-half of 1 percent of the 290 million American population under arms. Army and Marine ground combat forces are fighting a real war. We have suffered about 15,000 killed and wounded in the war on terrorism. Casualties among U.S. combat units in Iraq now approach the loss rates in Vietnam.

This is a volunteer and extremely small military. And many might argue that the country is not really at war — that only the armed forces and the CIA are. But the fact is that the ground combat capability of the U.S. armed forces to strike first has been weakened to the point that it puts America at significant and unnecessary risk.

### **HOW MANY?**

The crucial first issue is how many troops are enough? The Army needs an increase in active strength of 80,000 soldiers, and 25,000 more Marines (at a minimum) are needed to carry out the

national security challenges we now face. We must also ask: How would we recruit and retain such a force, and how much would it cost? The inadequate size of our ground combat force has put such stress on our retention and recruiting that over time we will fail to attract and retain the competent and courageous men and women who have so successfully carried out military operations since Sept. 11, 2001.

Five of the six reserve components as well as the active Army and Marine Corps have failed to meet recruiting goals. The Army National Guard has failed to meet monthly goals throughout the current fiscal year. This after missing its mark by 7,798 recruits in fiscal 2003 and by 6,792 in fiscal 2004.

The Guard is now short 3,168 Army captains, those who lead key companies and company-sized units and serve in key staff positions.

The enlistment rate among active-duty Army soldiers for follow-on service in the Reserve or Guard has suffered major shortfalls. Army ROTC enrollment has dropped 16 percent over the past two school years. Army African-American enlistments are down disastrously. The enlistment of women in the Army, regular and reserve, also is down.

Not surprisingly, soldier quality, as measured by top category Army recruits (CAT I through IIIA) also is down. And the overall measurement of American youth's "propensity to enlist at age 17 to 21" is now down 20 percent.

We have a recruiting crisis which, as Schoemaker correctly pointed out to the media, is "not an Army problem ... It's a national challenge."

Army active-duty and reserve retention figures are widely touted as evidence that we do not have a manpower problem. However, the numbers cited by the Pentagon civilian leadership mask reality and expose their real fear of incurring what they believe to be the unacceptable personnel costs of increasing end strength.

What is absolutely true is that the morale of the men and women of our ground combat fighting forces is extremely high. They are the toughest, best-trained and most confident soldiers and Marines we have ever fielded.

The Selected Retention Bonus Plan has been extremely effective targeting soldiers and Marines for re-enlistment through lump-sum payments of up to \$40,000. Soldiers re-enlisting in the combat zones of Iraq and Afghanistan can receive tax-free payments of \$15,000 on the spot. These incentives, combined with good unit leadership and the pride of defending America, have resulted in substantial retention numbers. Elite combat formations, such as the U.S. Army 3rd Infantry Division now fighting in Iraq, have achieved 250 percent of their required re-up goals.

## **MISLEADING NUMBERS**

These numbers, though, can be misleading. Actual required U.S. active ground combat power is produced through an enormous reliance on the reserve components, civilian contractor support, call-ups of Individual Ready Reservists (IRR) and the so-called "stop-loss" program.

If these programs had not been implemented, our active-duty military capability to carry out the current level of operations would have collapsed sometime this year.

The reserve components have called up 412,000 National Guard and Reserve soldiers since Sept. 11. They now constitute more than one-third of our deployed combat force. The stop-loss program has become a "back door draft" keeping 13,445 soldiers of all components on active combat duty.

In addition, civilian contractors serve in lieu of Army combat power throughout the combat zones. We could not continue current operations without the continuing deployment of these dedicated employees. Hundreds of contractors have been killed or wounded.

Civilian contractors are carrying out logistics, security, drug eradication and administrative responsibilities that are essentially military in nature. Some are armed and conducting military policetype missions employing helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft and armored vehicles. These civilian contractors operate in high legal risk and on the margins of the Law of

## Land Warfare.

Contractor operations are also more expensive in many respects than those performed by the uniformed military people they directly replace. Ground commanders are keenly aware that contractors cannot be required to perform their vital duties during extreme conditions of danger. Contractors are quite simply a more politically desirable quick-fix to make up for inadequate Army active-duty ground combat power.

There are an estimated 30,000 civilian contractors working with U.S. forces in Iraq. They are the second-largest coalition contingent after the active U.S. military forces. They are also greater than the sum of all non-U.S. forces. In any other war, these logistics, maintenance, and security contractor functions would have been executed by armed, uniformed military personnel.

Congress should increase the ground combat capability of the U.S. armed forces on an emergency basis in the coming two years. We are vulnerable to any new strategic requirements.

We cannot sustain the current rate of deployments and will be forced to begin a significant reduction in deployed units regardless of the on-the-ground realities. The president had the moral and political courage to strike back at the gathering threats in Afghanistan and Iraq after the dreadful losses of Sept. 11, but we must now recruit, train and maintain an Army and Marine Corps that can continue to dominate our enemies.

The Defense Department's senior leaders argue that we cannot afford the cost of building manpower-intensive ground combat capabilities. They also suggest that American youth simply will not step forward and defend us. Finally, they assert it would take years to increase the size of the required ground combat capability — too late to affect the temporary nature of the threat.

These are weak arguments. Defense Department civilian officials note that personnel compensation costs make up more than 35 percent of the Pentagon's \$402 billion budget. Where is the logic? We are at war. America is now spending far less on defense as a percentage of our gross national product than during previous threats to our security, such as World War II. Let's calculate the larger costs of losing our position of security, wealth and influence in a dangerous world.

Can America's ground combat capabilities be increased rapidly, or is a 30,000-soldier increase the maximum we can absorb in three years? In World War II we took a tiny military force and rapidly expanded it to 16 million men and women deployed worldwide. We could promote the top 30 percent of the current U.S. Army non-commissioned officer and officer leadership on the spot and suffer no loss of effectiveness. And we can produce disciplined, competent physically strong soldiers and Marines in 30 weeks of intensive training. In 24 months we could easily expand the Army by 80,000 troops, and the Marines by 25,000.

Will America's young people step forward to defend us in sufficient numbers, or have the bitter losses in Iraq and Afghanistan scared off our young men and women?

The real question is whether we can create a package of educational, compensatory and political inducements to achieve our ground combat personnel goals. America's parents, coaches and educators must ask our nation's youth to defend us.

This is not the job of Army and Marine recruiters. This is the responsibility of our most senior political leaders — the president, members of Congress, state governors and local mayors. This message must be on television and be repeated at high school and college graduations and wherever young men and women gather.

The second requirement is to reward military service in the same complete way that we backed our troops in World War II. These new soldiers and Marines need not stay until retirement — we need them to join us for three years to fight. In return, we should expand the targeted bonus program that is achieving such excellent results. Four years of college tuition and a substantial cash signing bonus will bring in the infantrymen, military police and logistics first-term soldiers that we need. Combat is primarily a young person's business.

We have started something we must finish in this war on terrorism — or we will put the American people at significant peril. The Army and the Marine Corps need the nation's support. The responsibility of defending the country is a shared one: those who are privileged to wear the uniforms of the armed forces, the men and women who serve in the Congress, and the American people. We must act now, or be prepared to deal with even more serious threats in the years ahead.

*Retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey is the Bradley Distinguished Professor of International Security Studies at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, N.Y. He serves as an NBC news commentator on national security issues and heads an Alexandria, Va.-based consulting firm.*