



Underwhelming Force

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En el marco del debate sobre el tipo de fuerza que debe desplegarse en Iraq para hacer frente a los retos que la resistencia sunita está planteando, Tom Donnelly, uno de los mejores analistas norteamericanos, comenta los cambios previstos por el Pentágono en los próximos meses.

THE PENTAGON'S "PLAN" to reduce troop strength in Iraq from the current 132,000 to 105,000 by next May is not so much a reflection of the military requirements of occupation as an expression of inadequate resources: Absent full mobilization (a new military draft or something like it), this is all the ground force the United States can muster.

A quick look at the rotation plan--"Operation Iraqi Freedom 2," the Pentagon calls it--shows just how bare the cupboard is. According to the Washington Post, "elements" of the 1st Infantry Division, based in Germany, and the 1st Cavalry Division, from Fort Hood,

Texas, will form the core of the OIF-2 force, replacing the tank and mechanized infantry forces of the 4th Infantry and 1st Armored divisions and the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment. This will result in only a slight reduction in heavy forces, probably a good idea in itself. There's little need for heavy force, though the armor protection provided by M1 tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles remains quite useful. But as a consequence, the available heavy Army will be tapped--that is, temporarily exhausted and in need of time off. The next heavy unit to rotate to Iraq is the 3rd Infantry Division from Fort Stewart, Georgia--which led the march to

Baghdad and has only recently returned home.

The OIF-2 force will also include the Army's only "Stryker" brigade, based at Fort Lewis, Washington. The Stryker is like an armored car, lighter and less heavily armed than a tank or a personnel carrier. It also happens to be the Army's only significant modernization initiative in two decades. While the Stryker will be easier to operate than tanks and Bradleys, it lacks protection against the ubiquitous rocket-propelled grenades favored by Iraqi insurgents. In Afghanistan, the Soviets quickly learned that these sorts of "medium-weight" vehicles can be deathtraps in ambushes. Also, for budgetary reasons, the Stryker lacks the relatively modest firepower of the Marines' Light Armored Vehicle. And even if the Stryker brigade proves successful, its triumph will be difficult to build on since there aren't any similar units to rotate into its place.

Additional light infantry will be provided by a brigade from the 25th Infantry Division, based in Hawaii. Substituting for the 82nd Airborne, the brigade unfortunately lacks the 82nd's supporting forces, particularly its helicopters. Nor is there any Army equivalent for the 101st Airborne, which will be sorely missed when the division returns to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, this spring. Its fleet of helicopters gives it extraordinary mobility, allowing it to cover almost the entire northern half of Iraq. Also, the 101st has done an especially good job of adapting to the post-combat mission. Its primary headquarters, the city of Mosul, is the poster child for Iraqi reconstruction.

Twenty thousand troops from the 1st Marine Division at Camp Pendleton, California, are returning to Iraq, even though many of them just arrived home. They're heading to the "Sunni

Triangle," northwest of Baghdad, the hottest hot spot around. The Marines, too, have received high marks for shifting into peacekeeping mode. Too bad they plan to do only their usual six-month rotation cycle--the traditional length of Marine sea-duty "pumps." They'll be changing out twice as often as their counterparts--in many cases exiting just as commanders begin to really understand the local area.

By far the most controversial element of Rumsfeld's rotation plan is its increasing reliance on reserves. This week, about 37,000 Army and 6,000 Marine reservists were alerted for an 18-month call-up to active service and told to expect to spend as much as twelve months total in Iraq. While the size of the Iraq force is being scaled back, the reserve slice of the pie is increasing from 28,000 to 39,000--nearly 40 percent of the projected total. In addition to contributing logistics and combat support, reservists will provide a significant presence among combat units with three Army National Guard brigades from North Carolina, Arkansas, and Washington state.

In a way, the Bush administration, Rumsfeld especially, deserves credit for making this difficult decision. Lyndon Johnson's decision not to call up National Guard units had devastating consequences for the U.S. Army in Vietnam and led to a major negative shift in public opinion. But for all that the reserves can deliver, their basic structure is a relic of the Cold War. Designed for mobilization in the event of another world war, the reserves are one of the least reformed elements of the defense establishment. In Iraq, these units will undergo trial by fire. Not only will the tours be longer, exacerbating tensions in families, hometowns, and workplaces, but the duty is far more dangerous than, for example, the Balkans missions of the 1990s.

Many other problems seem likely to attend the execution of the rotation plan. Rotating large forces is dangerous. The increase in convoy traffic in Iraq will increase opportunities for roadside bombings. Rotation also promises to be time-consuming. And, as previously mentioned, much hard-won experience will be lost in the handovers.

Rotation will begin at the same time as the American primary season and will last about as long. So, just as the winds of politics really pick up, decisions on how to provide for the next rounds of rotation (OIF-3 and OIF-4) will be made. The preferred course will likely be to simply extend our current underwhelming commitment in Iraq. Our military strategy will continue to be determined by force-structure decisions made decades ago. After all, the Defense Department still refuses to accept the connection between Iraq and the

larger war. It also pretends to believe that the current level of operations is just a temporary spike when it clearly marks the beginning of a new norm.

Last week Sen. John McCain observed, "The simple truth is that we do not have sufficient forces in Iraq to meet our military objectives." Noting the rising number and increasing sophistication of guerrilla attacks and the pitfalls of hasty "Iraqification," McCain tried to tell the Pentagon and the president what senior military leaders say in private, but are too cowed to say out loud.

If the mission in Iraq does not soon become a driving force for transforming the U.S. military and, in particular, the U.S. Army, then the promise to "do what it takes" in Iraq will have meant very little. What it takes is more soldiers, now and for the future.

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