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## **No good reason to boost Army, Marine Corps end strength**

*Carl Conetta*



# **PDA**

**PROJECT ON DEFENSE ALTERNATIVES**

COMMONWEALTH INSTITUTE, CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

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*If it is easy for us to go anywhere and do anything, we will always be going somewhere and doing something.*  
– Sen. Richard Russell, Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee, 1967

*What's the point of having this superb military...if we can't use it?*  
– Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, 1993, as quoted by  
Secretary of State Colin Powell in *My American Journey*

## 1. A new direction or more shoulders to the wheel?

President Bush's request to increase the size of the Army and Marine Corps by 92,000 personnel follows on the heels of similar proposals by Congress members of both parties. Despite the bipartisan appeal of this idea, it is not at all clear what problem it is intended to solve or how it is supposed to solve it. Advocates may believe that America's troubles in Iraq provide reason enough to "grow" the Army and Marine Corps. But this view misconstrues both the lessons of that war and America's true security needs.

Certainly, boosting the Army and Marine Corps has a political utility for the President and his opponents, alike. Most immediately: the President needs to sustain Pentagon support for investing more bodies in the Iraqi cauldron. Both parties hope to curry favor with military constituencies and to convey an impression of hard-nosed realism (albeit belatedly in the case of the White House).

*But what about the proposal's utility in terms of US national security? Does it reflect a sober assessment of the problems that befuddle our present approach? Will adding more ground troops to the American policy tool box really deliver more security?*

*To what end?*

No one seriously contends that increasing the size of US ground forces will relieve the stress of their current Iraq deployments. Nor will it ease the strain of shipping additional troops to that country, as the President also proposes. This, because any additions to Army and Marine Corps end strength must come in small increments, and it takes time to build new units. Completion of the effort, if ratified by Congress, will occur after 2012. There will be no significant effect at all before FY 2009-2010.

Looking down the road: the proposed additions to Army and Marine Corps end strength will combine with other initiatives to dramatically increase America's capacity to sustain protracted ground operations overseas. The other relevant initiatives include the administration's

*Integrated Global Presence and Basing Strategy* and various Pentagon “business transformation” initiatives aiming to increase the proportion of military personnel available for operational duties. Taken together these efforts eventually would allow the United States to comfortably deploy *on a continuous basis* more than 100,000 ground troops outside Europe, Japan, and Korea – while the latter locations absorb more than another 60,000 troops.

As we show below, there is no manifest need for such a capability unless:

- US national leadership seeks to maintain a large contingent of troops inside Iraq indefinitely – a presence on the order of 70,000 troops; or,
- US leadership hopes to otherwise routinely and continuously involve 100,000 or more US ground troops in regime change, foreign occupation, “nation-building”, counter-insurgency, and/or stability operations.

The prospect of large numbers of US troops remaining in Iraq for many years to come is not an idle one, despite the present unpopularity of the war. Although proposals for beginning a process of withdrawal from Iraq have now become commonplace in Congress, few advocates talk about *total withdrawal* anytime soon – if at all. Complete withdrawal has significant traction in public opinion polls, but much less in the executive or legislative branches.

Put simply: the proposals to increase Army and Marine Corps end strength would enable the United States to “stay the course” charted by the Bush administration in Iraq and elsewhere – indefinitely. Much as the proposed Iraq “troop surge” serves as a riposte to seeking a diplomatic solution to the Iraqi impasse, the proposal to add to Army and Marine Corps end strength serves as an alternative to setting a new course at the level of national security strategy.

The proposal begs a variety of questions – first among them: Is “not enough boots on the ground” the chief lesson to learn from the Iraq debacle?

### *A national debate is in order*

Many critics have derided the Bush administration’s handling of the war. A more critical view is that the administration’s chief failure resides not at the level of war planning and execution, but at the level of national security strategy. The failure involves misapplying and over-relying on military instruments. It rests on the mistaken belief that the *type of enterprise* represented by the Iraq war – forceful regime change and coercive nation-building – is necessary to our security and practicable. This belief is a fount of unrealistic goals and impossible missions.

What has been lacking in recent years is strategic wisdom, not military personnel. Any perceived shortfall in the latter derives from the former. It would be better to correct the error, than feed it more boots – either now or in the future. Indeed, correcting it would obviate any apparent need to boost Army and Marine Corps end strength.

Minimally, the nation and its armed forces deserve an open and thorough debate on the strategic lessons of the Iraq misadventure *before* ramping up the nation's capacity to put more boots on the ground worldwide. To foreclose this debate for reasons of political expediency is to add insult to tragedy.

## 2. The President's proposal

In his 23 January 2007 State of the Union address, President Bush requested that Congress authorize the addition of 92,000 personnel to the United States Army and Marine Corps. This action would bring the two services up to end strengths of 547,000 and 202,000, respectively. Notably, the baselines for the increases – 482,000 for the Army and 175,000 for the Marines – were set in the late 1990s and both services are already significantly above them due to legislation related to the Iraq war. Today, actual Army end strength is approximately 507,000 personnel – not counting activated reserves. The active-component Marine Corps stands at about 181,000 uniformed personnel. Thus, the services will be adding to their current totals only 40,000 and 21,000 personnel, respectively.

In accord with the new initiative, the Marine Corps plans to raise its end strength to 184,000 by the end of FY 2007. Subsequently, it plans to add 5,000 personnel per year until 2011. The Army aims to have 518,000 soldiers by the end of the present fiscal year. Thereafter, it plans to add 7,000 per year until 2012. The services hope to fill most of the newly permanent slots by retaining current personnel or recruiting those who have recently left active duty. The annual goal for new recruits will rise by only 2,000-3,000.

The additions will allow the Army to fill out its new Brigade Combat Teams and add another six – for a total of 48. The Army also will add two Patriot air defense battalions to its present total of 13 (including two already under development). Presently, the Marine Corps plans to add before the end of 2007 a regimental combat team to its present roster of nine. More new units of various types will follow in both services.

There are several other initiatives also relevant to the future operational availability of US ground forces:

- DOD's *Integrated Global Presence and Basing Strategy* (IGPBS), which President Bush announced in August 2004, will bring back to US territory approximately 60,000 Army and Marine Corps troops previously stationed in Europe, Japan, and South Korea. They will become more available for use elsewhere.
- DOD "business transformation" efforts that aim to increase the proportion of uniformed personnel who are available for operational deployment have so far added more than 15,000 soldiers and marines to the pool of those deployable.

- Efforts to render the Army National Guard and Reserve more deployable aim to routinely make available four or five Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs), thus boosting by 25+ percent the number of BCTs that the Army can deploy continuously.

	30 Sept 1998	June 2001	June 2006
Operation Enduring Freedom			~18,000 <sup>1</sup>
Operation Iraqi Freedom			~100,000 <sup>1</sup>
Europe (of which Balkans)	72721 (7490)	73585 (9900)	39,919 <sup>1</sup> (2595)
Russia	38	85	29
other former USSR	25	40	58
Asia	51370	50116	37,820 <sup>1</sup>
Mideast, N. Africa, S. Asia	4233	3894	3227
Africa	497	282	1224
Western hemisphere	5202	788	1080
Undistributed	4283	3833	2,000 <sup>1</sup>
Total	138369	132623	204857
End strength	657000	651670	675285
Percent Deployed	21%	20%	30+%

1. Data for Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom are derived and approximate. DOD reporting for these operations mixes active and reserve personnel and may duplicate some troops counted as "undistributed". The figures in the chart accordingly correct and adjust DOD data in light of testimony by service leaders. They are best estimates of the actual distribution of active-component troops. Data on Europe and Asia subtract those troops assigned to these areas but actually serving in Iraq or Afghanistan; they are reported in the operations categories.

Source: US Department of Defense, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, Statistical Information Analysis Division, Active Duty Military Personnel Strengths by Regional Area and by Country, 30 Sept 1998, 30 June 2001, 30 June 2006 (Washington DC: DOD, 1998, 2001, 2006);  
<http://siadapp.dior.whs.mil/personnel/MILITARY/Miltop.htm>

All told, the various initiatives would make it possible for the US Army and Marine Corps to keep a combined total of 23-24 combat brigade equivalents in the field continuously. Only five of these would be routinely in Europe, Japan, or South Korea. The remaining force, available for

use elsewhere, would be roughly equivalent in numbers of combat units to the force presently deployed in and around Iraq.

### 3. The present situation

Currently the aggregate end strength of the active-component Army and Marine Corps is approximately 688,000 troops. On 30 June 2006, the Defense Department's Statistical Information Division registered it as 675,285. At that time:

- Approximately 200,000 active-component troops were deployed overseas, including nearly 100,000 in Iraq;
- Another 18,000 were in Afghanistan;
- Outside of the Afghan and Iraq operations, the Army and Marine Corps had approximately 85,000 active-component troops stationed or deployed overseas.
- Of these latter, almost 40,000 were in Europe, including approximately 30,000 in Germany; and,
- Another 40,000 were in the Pacific region, mostly in South Korea and Japan.

Clearly, the present level of commitment has placed extreme stress on the services.<sup>{1}</sup> In mid-2006, more than 30 percent of active-component ground force end strength was deployed overseas. Although an even larger proportion can be safely deployed *for brief periods* to fight big wars, the portion deployed overseas prior to the Afghan and Iraq wars was approximately 20 percent. (In July 2001, the United States had 132,500 US soldiers and marines stationed or deployed abroad – based on an aggregate ground force end strength of 652,000).

### 4. Impact of various initiatives

As noted already, the *Integrated Global Presence and Basing Strategy* (IGPBS) will make 60,000+ US troops more available for operational deployment outside Europe, Japan, and South Korea. Already, the numbers of US ground troops present in Europe and Asia are much less than prior to 9/11. On 30 June 2001, there were 73,500 in Europe and 50,000 in Asia. As noted above, by June 2006, less than 78,000 ground troops total were left in Europe and Asia.

The reduction in European and East Asian deployments from 2001 levels was driven by the demands of *Operation Enduring Freedom* and *Iraqi Freedom*. However, they also correspond to plans under the IGPBS (also known as the *Global Posture Realignment* plan), which will eventually drive the number down to approximately 60,000 (plus 8,000 Marines in Guam).

As noted above, efforts to increase the proportion of the Army and Marine Corps that is deployable have already added more than 15,000 troops to the pool.

Efforts to make more reservists and reserve units routinely available for operational deployment overseas will have an uncertain impact. The goal is to have National Guard units available for a 12-month deployment once in every six year period; regular Army reservists would be available once in every five or six years. Theoretically, this might make as many as 90,000 reservists available for deployment at all times – although half that number is more realistic. If the National Guard succeeds in making four to five BCTs available at all times, 15,000 reservists would be directly associated with these units.

Finally, turning to the proposal to add 92,000 active-component ground force personnel: How many of these would be “deployable”? It is the Army and Marine Corps’ intention that they substantially draw on the existing non-deployable (or “institutional”) support base without adding proportionately to it. This is a reasonable expectation. The additions are slated to fill out the already planned Army expansion (from 33 to 42 brigades), while also adding seven brigade/regiment equivalents to the US ground force total. This alone could require nearly 40,000 personnel. Various field support units for the new BCTs, including combat support, might easily claim all the remaining new personnel. It is unlikely, however, that the two services can increase their size by 15 percent without some increment in their institutional base. Recruitment and training, alone, absorb 15 percent of the ground services’ personnel.

A reasonably conservative estimate is that approximately 80 percent of the new troops will enter the operational component, rather than the more standard two-thirds. To maintain rotation standards, however, only one-third of the deployable pool would be available for routine duty overseas. (Twice this many might be deployed for short-periods in response to a crisis.)

## 5. Overseas deployment options

The possible aggregate effect of these initiatives is assessed in *Table 2*. It shows the likely change in the number of active-component ground force personnel who can be easily deployed at any one time for missions outside Europe, Japan, and South Korea. The Table compares the situation in June 2001 with two alternative futures.

Future 1 shows an illustrative pattern of overseas deployment assuming (i) the baseline ground force end strength set out in the 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review – 482,000 active-component Army personnel and 175,000 Marines, (ii) the effect of recent enhancements to ground force “deployability”, and (iii) the effect of the *Integrated Global Presence and Basing Strategy*.

Future 2 shows the additional effect of increasing Army and Marine Corps end strength by 92,000.

<b>Table 2. Alternative Futures: Routine Overseas Deployment of Active Component US Ground Forces</b>			
	<b>Mid-2001 (normalized) <sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Future 1 • Global realignment • Improved deployability</b>	<b>Future 2 • F1 enhancements • Add 92,000 personnel</b>
<b>Long-term commitments</b>	<b>116,000 <sup>2</sup></b>	<b>62000</b>	<b>62000</b>
Europe	~64,000 <sup>2</sup>	30000	30000
Asia	~52,000	32000	32000
<b>Other missions (actual or available)</b>	<b>23,000</b>	<b>~83,000</b>	<b>~108,000</b>
Afghanistan		15000	15000
Persian Gulf & Mideast (outside Iraq)	4000	15,000 <sup>3</sup>	15,000 <sup>3</sup>
Other (including Iraq)	12,000 <sup>4</sup>	?	?
Undistributed	7000	~53,000	~78,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>139,000 <sup>1</sup></b>	<b>~145,000</b>	<b>~170,000</b>
<b>Reserve-component combat brigades (available for continuous deployment)</b>		<b>3-4 BCTs <sup>5</sup></b>	<b>3-4 BCTs <sup>5</sup></b>
<p>1. The total number of active-component ground force personnel that could be continuously deployed in 2001 is derived by applying the "one-in-three" standard to the pool of "deployable" personnel at that time. All but 7,000 were actually deployed. These remaining 7,000 are recorded as "undistributed."</p> <p>2. Not counted in this total are 9,900 troops deployed in the Balkans. These are counted in the "Other missions" category.</p> <p>3. Assumed minimum presence in the area</p> <p>4. For 2001, includes deployments to the Balkans, CIS countries, Latin America, and Africa</p> <p>5. Numerous additional reserve support units to be available</p> <p>Source: US Department of Defense, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, Statistical Information Analysis Division, <i>Active Duty Military Personnel Strengths by Regional Area and by Country</i>, 30 June 2001 (Washington DC: DOD, June 2001); <a href="http://siadapp.dior.whs.mil/personnel/M05/hst0601.pdf">http://siadapp.dior.whs.mil/personnel/M05/hst0601.pdf</a></p>			

Both futures show a dramatic increase in the ground forces available for missions other than presence in Europe, Japan, and South Korea. In both cases, the Table assumes that at least 15,000 troops will remain in Afghanistan. It also assumes that a minimum of 15,000 personnel will remain in the Mideast and Persian Gulf area, although not inside Iraq. The undistributed remainder is approximately 53,000 in the Future 1 option and 78,000 in the Future 2 option. Competing for these troops would be other contingency operations, small routine missions, and standard rotations. Another draw on the undistributed troops would be any strategic reserve set aside for flexible crisis response. Twenty thousand active-component ground forces plus the reserve component Brigade Combat Teams would constitute a considerable reserve.



Only the Future 2 option might easily accommodate a large long-term presence inside Iraq. Counting the 15,000 troops already set aside for the Persian Gulf area, Option 2 would allow national leadership to deploy nearly 70,000 troops in and around Iraq, indefinitely.

In sum: The capacity of the United States to keep a large force inside Iraq indefinitely probably depends on a very significant addition to present Army and Marine Corps end strength, as the President proposes. It is likewise essential if the United States is to undertake similar large-scale, protracted occupation or counter-insurgency campaigns after withdrawal from Iraq.

By contrast, under Option 1, US ground forces might simultaneously and continuously accommodate two smaller-scale efforts – such as the 1992-1993 Somalia operation, the 1995-1996 Bosnia operation, or Operation Enduring Freedom. Even with US forces so engaged, the Option would allow about 30,000 active-component troops and 15,000 activated reserve troops to immediately redeploy in the case of a crisis elsewhere. Should a crisis occur in Europe, East Asia, or the Persian Gulf, they would link with forces already in place. Within four or five weeks, they could be joined by another 50,000 active-component ground troops drawn out of their “down” cycles at home. Within a few months, a force comparable in size to the one that fought and won the first phase of the 2003 Iraq war would be in the field. Such a surge could be maintained safely only for a short period, however: no more than eight months or so. And it would have to be followed by a “refractory period” of reduced overseas deployments.

Of course, Option 2 could do all this, too – and more: it could keep an additional 25,000 troops sitting inside Iraq.

## **6. The rationale for adding troops**

### *Counter-terrorism requirements*

In his State of the Union address, the President justified the additions to Army and Marine Corps end strength in terms of “preparing for the challenges ahead” in the so-called “war on terror”. Americans are rightly concerned about the threat posed by international terrorist organizations. Of course, in the Administration’s view, the “war on terror” encompasses much more than counter-terrorism operations, *per se*.

To truthfully gauge the requirements imposed by counter-terrorism operations, they must be viewed as distinct from efforts to overturn governments and to stabilize or reconstruct entire countries. And they are distinct from counter-insurgency campaigns, which involve much more than efforts to fight terrorist cells and groups. At heart, counter-terrorism involves intelligence gathering, protective measures, and efforts to interdict or disrupt terrorist organizations and their activities. Combat operations in this area are mostly a matter of small-unit actions, occasionally reinforced or supported by larger units. It also is important to recognize that the responsibility for counter-terrorism campaigns divides among military and civilian agencies – with the latter carrying a substantial part of the burden.

Outside of Afghanistan and Iraq, relatively few overseas ground troops are devoted principally to the interdiction of terrorist organizations or to anti-terrorism training and support activities. As best can be gleaned from open sources, the current overseas allocation of ground troops to counter-terrorism field operations outside of Iraq and Afghanistan is substantially less than 10,000 personnel. DOD may decide to allocate more, but this hardly justifies adding to Army or Marine Corps end strength. An adequate number of billets might be found within existing foreign deployments, which include about 30,000 troops sitting in Germany.

It is the Iraq war specifically, not counter-terrorism operations in general, that is pinching our armed forces.

### *Conventional war requirements*

On 23 January 2007, Army Chief of Staff General Peter Schoomaker and Marine Corps Commandant General James Conway testified before the House Armed Services Committee that more soldiers and marines were needed because the Iraq war had constrained their capacity to respond to conventional war.<sup>{2}</sup> Of course, this is not the same as saying that the exigencies of conventional war, *per se*, dictate an increase in US ground forces. Once again, it is the Iraq occupation, not conventional threats that are pinching our armed forces. And, it is worth noting: the purported value of the troop increase as a palliative assumes that we keep large numbers of troops in Iraq for at least four more years. That is how long it would take a troop increase to have a substantial effect.

Generals Schoomaker and Conway do have a point, though. There is a trade-off between America's ability to "surge" its armed forces to fight a big war and its capacity to conduct multiple, smaller missions on a routine or continuous basis. The Iraq war, which was supposed to be quickly resolved, has degenerated into a large, protracted conflict, requiring an ongoing commitment. It does constrain America's capacity to surge ground troops for any other major operation – not so much due to its size as due to its duration.

At their current size, US ground forces can occasionally surge as many as 200,000 active-component soldiers and marines to fight an eight-month conventional war. Adding 50,000 reservists would bring the total up to 250,000 ground troops – a force 50 percent larger than the one that quickly toppled the Hussein regime. At the same time, the current force could keep an additional 80,000 active-component ground troops stationed elsewhere, with 170,000 more at home, preparing for future missions. Clearly we do not have enough ground troops to fight big conventional wars on a continual or annual basis. But there are enough to do it once every five or six years – which is far more than we have attempted during the past 15.

The Iraq war fouls this equation because it has routinely occupied 100,000 active component ground troops, while another 100,000 have been deployed or stationed elsewhere outside the United States. Over the course of four years, this has tired the force. Of course, many of those deployed outside Iraq are in geographical areas of key concern. And American air and naval power is only marginally occupied by Iraq. Should conventional adversaries move against US

interests somewhere other than in Iraq, they would undoubtedly face an avalanche of fire from the air and the sea.

Setting aside the problem of over-commitment of our ground forces, what does the Iraq war tell us about America's capacity for *conventional force-on-force combat*? It tells us that in the realm of "traditional" warfare, our relative capability is greater than ever before – and there is no need to add to it, so long as we use it wisely. What pertains to this assessment is the first month of the 2003 war – the conventional combat phase. And, indeed, no conventional combat experience of the past 15 years contradicts it.

During the first four weeks of the 2003 war there were approximately 167,000 US ground troops engaged in combat with Iraqi forces, including about 20,000 reservists. These were supported by 105,000 Navy and Air Force personnel. Together they undertook the most demanding type of large-scale conventional operation: a cross-border offensive with the aim of dislodging a government. They accomplished this task within six weeks at a cost of 173 US and allied deaths. Allied support comprised less than 15 percent of the total effort.

There are good reasons to conclude that the experience of the 2003 war actually *understates* America's capacity for conventional defense:

- The United States did not bring to bear all of its land, air, or sea power during the main combat phase of the Iraq war. Increments of 50 percent on the ground and 100 percent in the air would have been feasible, while still leaving about one-third of our assets in reserve. (Indeed, the United States soon poured another 60,000 troops into the theater, as fighting wound down.)
- As noted above: the Iraq war was an offensive one – a "war of choice". But most of the wars we might fight would be defensive in character or "counter-offensive." If the Iraqi military fared badly defending their home territory – despite all the advantages that this conveys – they (and adversaries like them) would fare much worse, unit for unit, attempting major offensive action across a border against US forces. Indeed, during both the 2003 Iraq war and the 1991 Gulf War, efforts by Iraqi units to "take the offensive" even tactically proved devastating to them. They would also fare worse in an attempt to defend captured foreign territory – at the end of long supply lines.
- Another advantage of defensive wars is that, in today's world, they tend to attract more support and allies (including indigenous ones). Thus, for instance, a defensive war in Korea should see the South Koreans doing much of the fighting on the ground.

It is at the level of military strategy that we might best strengthen our hand for conventional showdowns – by choosing against purely offensive campaigns and so-called "preventative" wars.

### *“Complex” operations*

Within this broad category of operations, occupation duty and counter-insurgency pose a substantial challenge. These are grinding, protracted, labor-intensive affairs that can involve large numbers of ground troops. If the United States intends to continue or broaden the practice of “regime change” and large-scale coercive “nation-building” efforts, or to involve itself routinely as a principal combatant in major counter-insurgency campaigns, then more ground troops are needed – and perhaps many more.

There are compelling reasons for the United States to consider an entirely different course, however.

The cost-benefit balance sheet for recent large-scale occupation, counter-insurgency, and nation-building efforts has been unsatisfactory – to say the least. Generally, the history of counter-insurgency efforts conducted by outside powers is not a happy one. This is partly because foreign military interventions readily prompt a nationalist-like response – to the advantage of rebel groups. Stability operations can suffer this effect as well, especially if the “consensus” surrounding them is weak or if coercive means are over-utilized.

Of course, insurgencies often fail and fade – especially if insurgent groups are isolated from their putative base (geographically, ideologically, or culturally) and lack a broader context of popular discontent. And counter-insurgency campaigns can win – if they attain a sufficient force density, are defending a generally popular and capable government, and rest largely on the shoulders of indigenous forces who are skilled, flexible, and respectful of human rights. When these favorable conditions do not attain, it is tempting although very difficult to compensate by means of forceful intervention. Worse yet is literal foreign military occupation, which can unite an entire country in opposition. Self-sustaining stability is not a likely outcome.

This argues for substantially reducing and restricting such commitments in the future – where and when the choice exists. And it usually does. This would not preclude selective efforts of other types guided by more modest aims, such as containing or mitigating conflict, instability, and their broader effects. And, of course, the United States can substantially aid post-conflict reconstruction efforts in non-coercive ways.

As for counter-insurgency: the United States might most usefully and profitably restrict its role to providing non-combat support, limiting the interference of other outside powers, brokering a diplomatic solution, advancing the cause of political reform, and preparing to deal with a new strategic circumstance. In other words: we should attempt to shape and manage the situation largely “from the outside”. One of the lessons that the US misadventure in Vietnam teaches is that America has a considerable capacity to limit damage, adapt policy, and eventually extract a favorable outcome.

## 7. Notes

1. Carl Conetta, *Fighting on Borrowed Time: The Effect on US Military Readiness of America's post-9/11 Wars*, Project on Defense Alternatives Briefing Report #19 (Cambridge MA: Commonwealth Institute, 11 September 2006).

2. "Iraq's Effect on Total Force Readiness, Hearing of the US House of Representatives Armed Services Committee," *Federal News Service*, 23 January 2007.

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