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Testimony of Lawrence J. Korb
House Committee on Armed Services, April 16, 2008

Chairman Ortiz, Chairman Abercrombie, Ranking Member Forbes, Ranking Member Saxton, and members of the Subcommittees on Readiness and Air and Land Forces of the House Armed Services Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the current state of the nation's ground forces. I cannot think of a more critical issue facing the nation at this time.

After more than five years of combat in Iraq and well over six in Afghanistan, America's ground forces are stretched to their breaking point. Over this time the Army has become severely overstretched and its overall readiness has significantly declined. The Marine Corps is suffering from many of the same strains as the Army and the situation for the Army National Guard is even worse. The deployment of more than 30,000 troops to Iraq in the president's latest escalation and the dispatch of another 3,200 Marines to Afghanistan have placed an unsustainable level of stress on U.S. ground forces and put their readiness to fight in other conflicts effectively in doubt.

Army and Marine commanders have only been able to provide these additional troops by putting additional stress and strain on those in uniform and by cutting corners on training and equipment. The unprecedented decision by the administration last April—that tours for Army brigades in Iraq and Afghanistan would be extended from 12 months to 15 months—is something that was not even done in Vietnam when we had over 500,000 troops on the ground, or in Korea where we had over 300,000. This only further demonstrates the dire situation that the Army is facing.

Senior military officers have increasingly been warning Congress and the American people about the burden placed on our men and women in uniform. In September of 2007, merely halfway into the administration's latest escalation, Army Chief of Staff General George Casey made the Army's situation clear in no uncertain terms: "our Army is out of balance...The current demand for our forces exceeds the sustainable supply. We are consumed with meeting the demands of the current fight and are unable to provide ready forces as rapidly as necessary for other potential contingencies." This is a polite way of saying that our Army is broken.

Six months after Casey testified and a full 15 months after the administration's escalation began, General Richard Cody, the outgoing Army Vice Chief of Staff, echoed Casey's bleak outlook: "I've never seen our lack of strategic depth be where it is today. Our readiness is being consumed as fast as we can build it." Moreover, the Army no longer has any fully ready combat brigades on standby should a crisis occur.

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The Bush administration's open-ended and unconditional military commitment in Iraq coupled with the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan means that there is no end in sight for relieving the stress on our ground forces. Because our readiness is being consumed in Iraq faster than we can build it, the ability of U.S. ground forces to recover is dependent upon the willingness of Iraqi Security Forces to take over the mission of securing their own nation. Prime Minister Maliki's ill-prepared raid on rival Shi'a gangs in Basra, which had to be aborted due to mass desertions within Maliki's own ranks among other reasons, demonstrates that these forces still do not have the motivation to fight and die for their nation nor will they have it in the foreseeable future. As a result, the overall security of the United States is in the hands of the Iraqis. This is a position a superpower like the United States should never be in.

In the following four sections I will discuss the current structure of the All-Volunteer Force, the misuse of the all-volunteer military in Iraq, personnel challenges confronting the ground forces, and in the final section I will make some recommendations for rebuilding and expanding the ground forces.

I. The All-Volunteer Force (AVF)

The all-volunteer force, particularly the Army component, as General John Abizaid noted in fall of 2006, was not "built to sustain a long war." The architects of the U.S. All-Volunteer Army intended it to rest on four pillars:

1. A small active duty force made up of well-equipped and highly trained active duty soldiers.
2. A large ready reserve that could supplement the active duty force during short wars like the first Gulf War, and during smaller scale operations like Bosnia. This larger reserve force would serve as a bridge to re-instating conscription in the event of a protracted war. This is why we make young men register for the draft when they turn 18.
3. In the event of a protracted conflict, the government would reinstitute the draft.
4. Private contractors would provide administrative and support services, freeing up soldiers to fight.

Because the Bush administration has refused to face up to the manpower implications of its open-ended commitment of forces—particularly in Iraq—by reinstituting the draft, it

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has been forced to take three disastrous steps. Active duty forces have been deployed and redeployed without sufficient dwell time; the Guard and reserves have been transformed from a strategic to an operational reserve, alternating deployments with active forces; and private contractors have taken on combat missions.

The Department of Defense has belatedly approved a plan to increase the size of the ground forces by 92,000 troops. However, it should be noted that these small end strength additions will not be finalized until 2012—a full three years into the next president’s administration—and will not be able to relieve the current stress and strain of our ground forces. If the president or his successor wants to continue this mindless, needless, senseless war in Iraq he or she should call for reinstating the draft. That would be the responsible path.

In my view, however, this would be a mistake on par with the initial invasion of Iraq. Instead, I believe the United States should set a firm timetable for the gradual redeployment of U.S. forces and their equipment. At the Center for American Progress we developed a plan that demonstrated how this could be done safely in 10 to 12 months. During that time the United States should work to train and support Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi government while gradually handing over responsibility for security to the Iraqis. This action should be backed up with a diplomatic surge in which the United States would engage all countries in the region. There is no guarantee that this approach will be effective in stabilizing Iraq or the region. In fact, given the misleading justifications for the initial invasion and the way in which the Bush administration has conducted the war, there are no good options left. But I believe that this course, a strategic redeployment and a diplomatic surge, provides the best chance for stabilizing the region as well as mitigating the impact of Iraq on the ground forces and U.S. national security. As General Maxwell Taylor, Army Chief of Staff, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Ambassador to South Vietnam, noted some three decades ago, “we sent the Army to Vietnam to save Vietnam; we withdrew the Army to save the Army.” Or as the late William F. Buckley noted, “if we had not left Vietnam we would not have won the Cold War. If we do not leave Iraq, we will not win the War on Terror.”

II. Overstretched Ground Forces

Today there is little doubt that the ground forces are overstretched. A recent survey of 3,400 active duty and retired military officers found that 88 percent of respondents believe that the Iraq war has stretched the U.S. military dangerously thin while 60 percent of the same officers believe that the U.S. military is weaker today than it was five years ago.

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Since the attacks of September 11, nearly 1.7 million U.S. servicemen and women have been deployed to either Iraq or Afghanistan. Of those 1.7 million, nearly 600,000 have been deployed to either theatre more than once. In early March 2007, we at the Center for American Progress released a study chronicling the effects that sustained deployments in Iraq are having on the Army. By analyzing every active Army Brigade Combat Team (BCT) we were able to convey the strain and fatigue placed on the force and illustrate its implications for our nation's national security. The facts that we compiled were troubling but in the subsequent year, these strains have been exacerbated.

Of the Army's 44 combat brigades, all but the First Brigade of the Second Infantry Division, which is permanently based in South Korea, have served at least one tour. Of the remaining 43:

- Five brigades have had one tour in Iraq or Afghanistan
- Thirteen brigades have had two tours in Iraq or Afghanistan
- Nineteen brigades have had three tours in Iraq or Afghanistan
- Six brigades have had four tours in Iraq or Afghanistan¹

The task of not only sustaining but increasing troop levels in Iraq has forced the Army to frequently violate its own deployment policy. Army policy holds that after 12 months of deployment in a combat zone, active duty troops should receive 24 months at home for "dwell time"—time at home between deployments to rest, recuperate, reconnect with family, integrate new unit members, train, and prepare to deploy again—before returning to combat. Even before the surge, the Army had reduced dwell time to one year. Since April of 2007, all Army combat brigades have been on a 15-month deployed to 12-month dwell time ratio before deploying again. Similarly, Marines have been on a 7-month deployment cycle for every 6 months at home.

Equally disturbing, both militarily and morally, is the fact that several units have been sent to either Iraq or Afghanistan who are not fully combat ready. Three units that are part of the president's latest escalation are glaring examples of inadequate dwell time:

- With only nine months at home between its first and second deployments to Iraq, the Third Brigade, First Armored Division from Fort Riley, KS, experienced one of the shortest dwell time periods of any unit in the Army.

¹ Because the Army would not provide this information, the Center for American Progress had to compile this data from an extensive review of available open source information about individual brigade deployments in local news reports and by calling the headquarters of individual brigades. Although we have high confidence that the information presented is accurate, we openly acknowledge that some pieces of information may be inaccurate or incomplete.

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- The Fourth BCT, 10th Mountain Division was activated in January 2005. It is currently on its second deployment of its three-year history. There were nine months of dwell time for the new unit, after 15 months deployed, between its first and second tours.
- Some Soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division, Second Brigade Combat Team (Fort Drum) had six months dwell time between its second and third post-9/11 deployments.

On April 11, President Bush announced that he would be following U.S. Army General David Petraeus' recommendations to withdraw 25 percent of American combat forces from Iraq by the end of July. Despite the president's assertion that the withdrawal of these troops represents a "return on success" for his "surge" policy, the president is merely making a virtue out of necessity.

The fact of the matter is that these five brigades, or about 20,000 combat troops, were scheduled to be withdrawn after their 15-month tours came to an end—whether Iraq witnessed a temporary decline in violence or not. It would have taken extraordinary measures such as an extension of these soldiers' deployments to 18 months to maintain current levels beyond this time.

Moreover, the 8,000 support personnel that deployed along with the surge's additional combat brigades will remain in Iraq after the surge draws down. This means that even with the current reduction in force levels, there will be more soldiers and Marines in Iraq after the surge runs its course in July than when it began in January of 2007. The president also announced that Army units would begin a one-to-one deployment-to dwell-time ratio, or 12 months deployed in combat followed by 12 months of dwell time.

These decisions are inadequate for two reasons. First, this change will have no immediate effect on relieving the stress and strain on our soldiers because it will not reduce the tours of any soldier currently deployed in Iraq or Afghanistan—and will only affect soldiers deploying after August 1, 2008. In fact, tens of thousands of soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan will remain there under the 15-month cycle until their deployment is over.

Second, even with this modest reduction in deployment length, the president will still be forcing the Defense Department to violate its own deployment policy. Department of

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Defense policy calls for a one-to-two ratio of deployment to dwell time. Dwell time is critically important to maintaining high levels of readiness in our armed forces.

President Bush also made no mention of the Marine Corps in his remarks. Though smaller than the Army, the Marine Corps, too, is feeling the effects of frequent repeated deployments.

Marine Corps

Just like the Army, the Marine Corps has also been under serious strain due to the increased operational tempo required to sustain the engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Marine Corps, our nation's premier expeditionary force, has over the past few years seen its capacity to quickly respond to contingencies around the world diminish. Currently, the Marine Corps has been able to limit its deployments to seven months. However, the constant cycle of deployments and demand for Marines in Iraq has meant that for all practical purposes, the Marine Corps has had to abandon its role as an expeditionary force, something that Commandant James Conway has said needs to be reversed. In effect, the Marines have become a second land Army. With the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit currently augmenting our forces in Afghanistan, we do not have an expeditionary presence capable of responding in event of contingencies in the Mediterranean and North Africa. This exemplifies the strain on our forces, and how other areas critical to our national security interest have been left vulnerable.

While the majority of Army units comprising the surge in Iraq will return in July, the Marine Corps will remain deployed overseas in large numbers until October, when 3,200 Marines are scheduled to return from their temporary deployment to Afghanistan. The need for more troops to fight in Afghanistan, the true central front against Al Qaeda, is clear. However, the United States does not have the troops to send. The fact that the Pentagon could only muster 3,200 Marines to send to Afghanistan this spring exemplifies the strain the Marine Corps is under. Commandant Conway recently commented, "give us some relief (in Iraq), and we'll go to Afghanistan in force." Marines are ready to take the fight to Al Qaeda, but can't because there aren't enough of them to go around.

Lack of sufficient dwell time has also hindered Marine units' ability to effectively train for the "full spectrum" of operations required of the Marine Corps as an expeditionary force. There has been an emphasis on counter-insurgency training, the primary type of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, at the expense of thorough training for other types of

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contingencies to which the Marine Corps is often the first responder—humanitarian assistance, non-combatant evacuation operations, or other operations of a non-counter-insurgency nature. Additionally, as is the case for the Army, units needing to train here at home are unable to do so as efficiently as is needed. This is in part because of equipment shortages resulting from equipment normally used to train at home having been sent to forward deployed units to use in Iraq and Afghanistan. The importance of dwell time cannot be overstated. Gen. Conway recently commented that sufficient dwell time is “critical to success in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

National Guard

The reserve component is also in tatters. The Pentagon has had to rely increasingly on the Army National Guard and Reserve in order to meet demands on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan. With the Pentagon straining to keep force levels high in Iraq, the Guard and Reserve are being used as an operational reserve, alternating deployments with the active force.

Since 2001, every Army National Guard combat brigade has been deployed overseas at least once and six have already been deployed twice. Moreover, last October, the Defense Department notified eight National Guard brigades to be ready to deploy to Iraq and Afghanistan beginning in either fall of 2008 or early 2009. Of the eight Guard units, all have already served at least once in either Iraq or Afghanistan since 2001.

According to the Defense Department’s standard deployment to dwell time ratio, reserve units should receive five years at home for every one year deployed. As with the active force, the DoD has been forced to break its own policies with regard to reserve deployment to dwell time ratio in order to maintain large numbers of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, three of the eight brigades on call returned from deployments in 2005 and two more returned from Iraq in 2006—well short of the recommended five years at home.

The Army Guard began the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq with its units short tens of thousands of soldiers, or about 15 percent to 20 percent of its required wartime needs, and equipped with only 65 percent to 70 percent of its required wartime needs. Those shortages have deepened as people and equipment are borrowed from units staying home to fill out those about to go overseas—a process known as “cross-leveling.”

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Today, the National Guard faces a \$48 billion equipment shortfall and 88 percent of all Army National Guard units are rated “not ready” according to a report completed earlier this year by the Commission on the National Guard and Reserves.

Equipment

The overall cost of operations in Iraq far exceeds its direct financial cost as well as the burden it has placed on our men and women in uniform. The high pace, long duration, and harsh climate of Iraq have taken a heavy toll on Army equipment in particular. Restructuring and rebuilding Army equipment after Iraq will be an incredibly costly endeavor. While the total cost is uncertain, the Government Accountability Office has released an estimate on the projected cost through 2013. The Army’s plans to equip modular units, expand the force, reset equipment, and replace prepositioned equipment are likely to cost at least \$190 billion. The breakdown the GAO has given is as follows:

- Resetting the force: \$118.5 billion
- Equipping restructured modular units: \$43.6 billion
- Increasing the number of and equipping of new Army units: \$18.5 billion
- Reconstituting prepositioned stocks: \$10.6 billion

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- Total \$191.2 billion

Lowering Standards

Even more troubling for the long-term readiness of the force is the fact that the Army has had to relax the standards for new recruits. Although the Army has trumpeted the fact that it achieved its 2007 recruitment goals, closer examination demonstrates this self-congratulation is not warranted. In 2006, for example, the Army raised its maximum age for enlistment twice, first from 35 to 40 and then from 40 to 42 while it shortened the enlistment period for some recruits from four years to as little as 15 months. The proportion of new Army recruits with high school diplomas dropped from over 90 percent in 2003 to 84 percent in 2005 to 71 percent in 2007—the lowest levels in at least 25 years. Further, in the last three years, the amount of recruits who scored in the lowest

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category, Category 4, has gone up six-fold. In 2006, the Army even recruited an 18 year-old autistic man to be a cavalry scout—one of the Army’s more dangerous assignments.

To further expand its diminishing pool of recruits, the Army has allowed recruits with criminal backgrounds to enlist at an alarming rate. Such offenders have been allowed to enlist after committing crimes such as arson, aggravated assault, robbery, and vehicular homicide—a process which the military terms “moral waivers.” 11 percent of new active-duty and Army Reserve troops in 2007 received a moral waiver, up from 7.9 percent in fiscal year 2006, according to figures from the U.S. Army Recruiting Command. So far this fiscal year, that number has increased to 13 percent, or one in eight soldiers. In fiscal 2003 and 2004, soldiers granted waivers accounted for only 4.6 percent of new recruits.

III. The Consequences of the Last Five Years in Iraq

The frequency and duration of deployments of U.S. servicemen and women to Iraq and Afghanistan have placed an incredible strain on the All-Volunteer Force. This deployment cycle has affected soldiers’ mental health and personal lives as well as enlisted and officer retention rates, all of which will affect the readiness of our ground forces over the long-term.

Among combat troops sent to Iraq for the third or fourth time, more than one in four show signs of anxiety, depression, or acute stress, according to an Army survey of mental health. Twenty-seven percent of noncommissioned officers on their third or fourth tour exhibit post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. The same study also noted that soldiers on multiple deployments report low morale, more mental health problems, and more stress-related work problems. Today, one in five troops returns from Iraq and Afghanistan with post-traumatic stress disorder.

In 2007, 121 soldiers committed suicide, an increase of more than 20 percent over 2006. An estimated 2,100 troops tried to commit suicide or injure themselves last year—up from 350 in 2002. Family life is also affected by the war, as 20 percent of married troops in Iraq say they are planning a divorce, and 42 percent of all returning service members report “feeling like a guest in their own home.”

The resulting anxiety, depression, and psychological trauma from prolonged and repeated exposure to combat is bound to take a significant toll on service members and their relationships. Over the long-term, these factors are shown to contribute to drinking

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problems, drug use, and domestic violence, indicating that the effects of prolonged tours in Iraq and Afghanistan will be with us for many years.

Retention Rates

Retention rates are also affected by frequent and prolonged deployments. The Congressional Research Service has noted that Army projections show its officer shortage—which will be approximately 3,000 line officers in FY 2007—will grow to about 3,700 officers in FY 2008, and will continue at an annual level of 3,000 or more through FY 2013. This FY 2008 shortage will include 364 lieutenant colonels, 2,554 majors, and 798 captains who entered in FYs 1991 through 2002. In response, the Army has begun promoting junior officers at record levels by reducing the promotion time to the rank of captain (O-3) from the historical average of 42 months from commissioning to the current average of 38 months. The promotion time from Captain to Major has also been reduced from 11 years to 10 years while 97 percent of eligible Captains have been promoted to Major as compared to the desirable rate of 80 percent. At the same time, 98 percent of First Lieutenants have been promoted to Captain, compared to the normal 90 percent. Meanwhile, the Guard and Reserve confront a corresponding shortfall of 7,500 officers.

Retention rates among the Army's primary source of future leaders are especially troubling. According to statistics compiled by West Point, of the 903 Army officers commissioned upon graduation in 2001, nearly 46 percent left the service in 2006 (the latest year for which statistics are available), 35 percent at the conclusion of their five years of required service, and another 11 percent over the next six months. And more than 54 percent of the 935 graduates in the class of 2000 had left active duty by this January, the statistics show.

To be sure, high retention rates will be inextricably linked to more predictable deployment schedules—and not only among officers. This conflict, which the administration deems "the long war," requires that the U.S. deploys knowledgeable, veteran soldiers and Marines to combat increasingly experienced and determined enemies. Without high retention rates, this will be impossible.

IV. Recommendations While Expanding and Rebuilding the Ground Forces

The administration's belated decision to expand the Army and Marines is long overdue.

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At the Center for American Progress we have been calling for such an expansion for the past five years. However, the difficult situation facing the Army and the Marines requires a long-term approach toward expanding and rebuilding the ground forces. Increasing the size of the Army and Marines will not help the situation on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead, growing these forces is about preparing America's military for the future. I have the following recommendations:

Don't Lower Standards. The Army and Marines should meet their new end-strength goals without relaxing recruitment standards or retention and promotion criteria. This will not be easy in the current environment. The overall percentage of youth who describe themselves as less willing to even consider military service doubled from 26 percent in 2003 to 52 percent in 2007. In order to ensure the Army and Marines continue to get the best and the brightest, the current target of adding 7,000 soldiers and 5,000 Marines per year is too ambitious in light of current circumstances and should be scaled back. Recruitment and retention standards should return to at least the pre-Iraq standards. Congress must make sure that the quality of U.S. military personnel does not slide as it did in the 1970s. It is worth waiting a few extra years to ensure that the Army and Marines attract the men and women who possess the specialized skill sets needed for an effective 21st-century military.

Expand with a Focus on Peacekeeping and Counterinsurgency Operations. Following the war in Vietnam, instead of building off the experience of fighting an unconventional force, the military adopted the mantra of "no more Vietnams" and shifted its focus back to confronting conventional threats. We cannot make this same mistake today. It is clear going forward that America's ground forces have to be prepared to engage an entire spectrum of operations, from conventional ground combat to humanitarian and peacekeeping operations. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown that while our ground forces remain conventionally unmatched, there is significant room for improvement in our ability to conduct counterinsurgency and peacekeeping operations. The U.S. Army should develop specialized "peacekeeping" or "stabilization and reconstruction" brigades. Such specialized brigades would alter both the type of recruit the Army is seeking and the type of person who might be interested in joining the Army.

Grow the Forces in a Fiscally Responsible Manner. Growing the ground forces is and will be expensive. The average annual cost of maintaining a single service member

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already exceeds \$100,000. Currently the defense budget is severely unbalanced. Despite claims that 9/11 changed everything, during Secretary Rumsfeld's tenure only two weapons systems were canceled. Many of the current weapons programs are unnecessary relics of Cold War-era thinking. The challenge confronting the Army and Marines in terms of both escalating personnel costs and the deepening equipment crisis requires significant congressional attention and funding. Expanding the ground forces and resetting the equipment from Iraq and Afghanistan should be the overriding priority in the defense budget.

Open Up the Military to all Americans Who Possess the Desire, Talent and Character to Serve. The Army and Marine Corps cannot afford to place unnecessary obstacles in the way of qualified men and women who want to serve. To this end, the military should make two major changes to its personnel policy:

- First, repeal the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. The “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy is counterproductive to military readiness. Over the past 10 years more than 10,000 personnel have been discharged as a result of this policy, including 800 with skills deemed “mission critical,” such as pilots, combat engineers, and linguists. These are the very job functions for which the military has experienced personnel shortfalls. General John M. Shalikashvili, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1993 when the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy was enacted, no longer supports the policy because he now believes that allowing gay men and women to serve openly in the military would no longer create intolerable tension among personnel and undermine cohesion. A recent Zogby poll supports this view. It found that three-quarters of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans were comfortable interacting with gay people.
- Second, all military occupations should be open to whoever qualifies, regardless of gender. Currently, the Army and Marines prohibit women from serving in infantry, field artillery, and Special Forces units that directly engage the enemy on the ground. The idea that women who possess the requisite mental and physical skills should somehow be “protected” from the dangers of combat fails to acknowledge the reality of the modern battlefield and the role women are already playing in Iraq and Afghanistan. Approximately a hundred women have been killed in these wars. We only impede our ability to build a 21st-century military by constructing barriers where none need exist.