

All Dressed Up With No Way to Fight

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This week Senator Hillary Clinton, citing a secret Pentagon report that suggested some marines killed in Iraq might have survived had they been wearing more body armor, became the latest in a long line of politicians to castigate the Pentagon for a supposed failure to adequately protect our fighting men and women. Well-intentioned as the senator might be, the body-armor issue, like so many in war, is just not that simple.

From 2000 until 2004, I was an infantry officer in the Army. I deployed with a light-infantry platoon to Afghanistan in 2002, then with a platoon of Army Rangers to Iraq in 2003 and back to Afghanistan in 2004. While I can testify that soldiers usually appreciate the protection body armor gives them, the load shouldered by the average infantryman often hinders his ability to fight -- especially at high altitude as in Afghanistan.

But in Iraq, as well, the "soldier's load" is often unbearable. Most studies recommend that a soldier should not be burdened with more than one-third of his body weight. But if you take a 160-pound soldier and put 40 pounds of Kevlar and body armor on him and then he picks up an automatic weapon, ammunition, water and first aid equipment, it's not long before he is carrying half his body weight -- and he is then expected to run, jump and fight insurgents, themselves carrying little more than a 10-pound AK-47. All of this, of course, often takes place in 120-degree heat in the cities of Iraq.

Lost among the politicians' cries for more extensive armor for the troops is the fact that most soldiers, in my experience and based on discussions with many, feel they have enough armor already -- and many feel they are increasingly being burdened with too much equipment. And the new supplementary body armor unveiled this week in Washington doubles the weight of the equipment -- worn over the torso and, now, the upper arms -- to 32 pounds from 16 pounds (for a medium-sized soldier).

While an Army spokesman said yesterday that the new equipment was developed based on feedback from units in the field -- and certainly, he assured me, not from any political pressure -- the statements from soldiers in Iraq tell a different story.

An article last week from The Associated Press noted that "soldiers in the field were not all supportive of a Pentagon study that found improved body armor saves lives" and that some argued "that more armor would hinder combat effectiveness."

As an Army captain told The A.P.: "You've got to sacrifice some protection for mobility. If you cover your entire body in ceramic plates, you're just not going to be able to move."

Thankfully, many military leaders at both the tactical and strategic levels recognize they must strike a balance between protecting soldiers and preserving their mobility and fighting abilities. At some point, the public's desire to wrap our troops in a protective blanket of armor just gets ridiculous.

"We don't want a medieval knight," Maj. Gen. Stephen M. Speakes, the director of force development for the Army, said this week. "We are not going to be hoisted onto a horse."

Similarly, lower-ranking Army officers and noncommissioned officers with whom I have spoken over the past few days stress the need for two things: the development of lighter armor, and also the preservation of a leader's right to tailor his unit's load -- including the body armor they wear -- depending on the mission.

Sadly, this controversy -- like the debates over Army interrogation tactics, prisoner abuse and troop withdrawals -- takes place within the context of a nation grown weary of its adventure in Iraq and a Bush administration on the defensive. Elected officials like Senator Clinton, while no doubt genuinely motivated by concern for the welfare of our soldiers, also see political opportunity. And the voices that get overlooked are the most important ones: those of the soldiers themselves.

Much of this furor started a year ago when a soldier from my hometown, Chattanooga, Tenn. -- apparently encouraged by an embedded reporter from the local newspaper (which, incidentally, was once owned by my family) -- complained of digging through scrap heaps to jury-rig "hillbilly armor" for his unit's vehicles in a Kuwait question-and-answer session with Donald Rumsfeld.

Secretary Rumsfeld's callous answer -- "You go to war with the Army you have, not the Army you might want or wish to have" -- was roundly criticized as being out of touch with what the rest of America felt: that the men and women who serve our country in battle deserve nothing but the best equipment.

The problem with this noble sentiment is that the American public and its elected representatives don't always understand what military officers and soldiers do: that the safety of individual soldiers must always be balanced against the ability to accomplish the unit mission.

I worry that this timeless lesson is now being forgotten in the interest of minimizing American casualties.

"Protecting soldiers," as an Army spokesman told me the other day, "is our No. 1 priority."

Excuse me, but shouldn't winning the war be our No. 1 priority?

Andrew Exum is the author of *This Man's Army*. ❖

New York Times

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