

For Some Soldiers The War Never Ends

by [Andrew Exum \(/experts/andrew-exum\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Andrew Exum \(/experts/andrew-exum\)](#)



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Many Americans, feeling that we did not have enough troops in Iraq, were pleased when the Defense Department announced last month that 20,000 more soldiers were being sent to put down the insurgency and help rebuild the country. Unfortunately, few realized that many of these soldiers would serve long after their contractual obligations to the active-duty military are complete. In essence, they will no longer be voluntarily serving their country.

These soldiers are falling victim to the military's "stop-loss" policy -- and as a former officer who led some of them in battle, I find their treatment shameful. Announced shortly after the 9/11 attacks and authorized by President Bush, the stop-loss policy allows commanders to hold soldiers past the date they are due to leave the service if their unit is scheduled to be deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. Military officials rightly point out that stop-loss prevents a mass exodus of combat soldiers just before a combat tour.

But nonetheless, the stop-loss policy is wrong; it runs contrary to the concept of the volunteer military set up in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Many if not most of the soldiers in this latest Iraq-bound wave are already veterans of several tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. They have honorably completed their active duty obligations. But like draftees, they have been conscripted to meet the additional needs in Iraq.

Among them are many of my former comrades in the Second Brigade of the 10th Mountain Division, based at Fort Drum, N.Y. In the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks, I led a platoon of light infantry first to Kuwait in 2001 and then in combat in Afghanistan during Operation Anaconda in 2002. My men had all enlisted before the 9/11 attacks. In Kuwait and Afghanistan, they performed flawlessly, with several earning commendations for bravery in combat.

Yet even after two deployments to Afghanistan, and with many nearing the end of their commitments, these soldiers will have to head to Iraq this summer and remain there for at least a year. I remain close with them, and as the unit received its marching orders a few called me to express their frustration. To a man, they felt a sense of hopelessness -- they know they have little say over their future until the Army releases them.

I grew angry when my former radio operator told me the Army had canceled his orders to return home to San Francisco this month to start college. Another man had been due to leave the Army just two days after the order was given, but was instead told to draw his gear and prepare for 12 months in the desert. And as stressful as these orders are for the soldiers, imagine what their families are feeling. Theirs are lives interrupted by the needs of Iraq.

I wonder if I might have been affected too had I stayed at Fort Drum until the end of my service. (Instead, I left a year and half ago to complete my four-year obligation with a special operations unit in Iraq and Afghanistan, and thus

don't fall under the Fort Drum stop-loss order.) I can imagine how angry and betrayed I would feel if, having served my obligation to the military for my college scholarship, I were told I was going to Iraq for a year against my wishes.

Of course, I would have done whatever was asked: as a commissioned officer, my oath of service to my country never really ends. But for enlisted soldiers, men and women who sign on with the Army for a predetermined period of service in lieu of commissions, stop-loss is a gross breach of contract.

These soldiers have already been asked to sacrifice much and have done so proudly. Yet the military continues to keep them overseas -- because it knows that through stop-loss it can do so legally, and that it will not receive nearly as much negative publicity as it would by reinstating the draft.

Volunteer soldiers on active duty don't have the right to protest or speak out against the policy. So my former radio operator has little option but to quietly pack up and put college on hold. For those of us who have seen these soldiers repeatedly face death, watching them march off again -- after they should have already left the Army -- is painful.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld continues to claim that the military, as now structured, can meet the needs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He is simply wrong, as the Pentagon's actions make clear. In addition to stop-loss, the military is now activating significant portions of the Individual Ready Reserve as part of what it is calling an "involuntary mobilization."

The individual reserve consists of troops who are no longer expected to participate even in regular training; the idea is that they are to be called up only in a catastrophic national emergency. Most are veterans recently released from active duty; others are college students on scholarship and cadets at the service academies.

So several of my former soldiers now in the individual reserve -- who have left the Army, begun new careers and have not even been serving in reserve or National Guard units -- have now been told to expect orders to return to active duty in the near future.

Stop-loss and the activation of the inactive reserve show how politics has taken priority over readiness. The Pentagon uses these policies to meet its needs in Iraq because they are expedient and ask nothing of the civilian populace on the eve of a national election. This allows us to put off what is sure to be a difficult debate: whether our volunteer military is adequate to meet our foreign policy commitments. Meanwhile, in the absence of this debate, the men and women of our armed forces languish.

Last weekend, veterans of World War II were honored on the Mall in Washington for their sacrifices. Our government should begin treating the veterans of the global war on terrorism with a similar degree of respect, not as election-year fodder.

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

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