

COOPER WARNS OF NATIONAL GUARD "BURN OUT"
*Salutes Nashville 's 118 th Air Wing for Eight Months in Iraq,
But Questions "Fairness" if Unit is Called to Return Soon*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – In special House Armed Services Committee hearings today on Iraq, U.S. Representative Jim Cooper warned that current Administration policies are "abusing" many National Guard and Reserves and may lead to a significant exodus of valuable, well-trained men and women from military service.

"I have grave concerns about the stress we are putting on our Reserves and National Guard forces in support of overseas military operations," Cooper said. "While these patriotic Americans will continue to serve when called, I am troubled by recent policy changes in Iraq and the first signs that we may be threatening the very foundation of our National Guard and Reserve military system. Simply put, we are abusing many of our National Guard and Reserve troops.

"We may be able to get away with this in the short run," Cooper said, "but over time we are going to see a mass migration of experienced, mature, well-trained Reservists and National Guard members heading for the door once they get home. Getting them back will be impossible and training replacements will be very expensive. We can't wait for a crisis to emerge; Congress must act now to address this problem."

Cooper made the remarks during a special hearing called by the House Armed Services Committee to consider current U.S. policy and operations in Iraq. Cooper, a member of the committee, called for the hearings in a letter sent to the Committee Chairman on September 9th. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Ambassador Paul Bremer, the President Envoy to Iraq and Administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority, testified before the House panel.

Discussing his concerns regarding National Guard and Reserve deployment, Cooper said he first heard of the problems from members of Nashville 's 118th Air Wing of the Tennessee National Guard. "More than 250 troops and 10 aircraft just completed eight months of service in very austere and difficult conditions in the Persian Gulf supporting operations in Iraq, and less than a month after they return home, they are already being told they are going to have to leave their families and go again," Cooper said.

"Moreover, it is my understanding that there are at least seven other Air National Guard C-130 units in other states that have yet to be mobilized for service in the Gulf," Cooper said. "Instead of sending another unit that hasn't been called up, the Air Force wants to send back troops that have already served and only got home a month ago. None of this makes sense to me," Cooper continued. "Why burn out one unit, in terms of both people and equipment, when there are other equivalent units available? How is it fair to the families and employers of these loyal Americans to do something like this?"

In his remarks during the hearing, Cooper also questioned last week's announcement by the Army that thousands of Reservists in Iraq will remain several months longer

than originally advised.

"Instead of mobilizing additional National Guard members and Reservists who have yet to go overseas, we are simply burning out the troops who are already there," Cooper said. According to Cooper, recent reports indicate the National Guard may fall 20% short of its recruiting goals for this year.

Cooper said there are two ways to address the current problems. "One option is to simply increase the size of the active duty force by a significant amount. Unfortunately, the price tag for adding divisions, air wings or ships to our military in big numbers is enormous."

The other option is to dramatically increase the pay, benefits and perquisites of National Guard and Reserve service, Cooper said. "Closing the gap between active duty forces and National Guard forces and reservists in healthcare, special pays, family housing, education benefits, retirement benefits, and other areas may be the only way we can attract good people to reserve service in the future. If we're going to ask more of our reserve forces, it's only fair of them to ask more of us in return."

Earlier this week, Cooper called on Congress to pass H.R. 2176, which would provide fair health care treatment to National Guard and Reserve forces.

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