

Our Overextended Troops Could Use a Little Help

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On June 11, I traveled to Kuwait and Iraq and met with top leaders in the military and soldiers, Marines and airmen from Washington state. The men and women who are serving their country are working hard, and we should make every effort to support them. To do so properly, it is time the Bush administration and Congress seriously considered expanding the size of our volunteer military.

With numerous military bases in the Puget Sound region and throughout the state, and with a total of more than 72,000 soldiers, sailors, Marines, airmen and members of the reserves and National Guard, Washington state plays a critical role in the military. Fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan is not just something that we see on the nightly news. It affects real families and communities here in the Puget Sound region on a daily basis. Currently, thousands of troops from this area are deployed to flash points around the world. What happens to our military has a large and personal impact here.

During my visit, I wanted to gain firsthand knowledge of the situation on the ground and the state of our military readiness in that region. Generals and soldiers alike agreed that they are committed to the mission and are now getting the supplies and equipment they need.

But there was one clear message that I heard over and over again: Our soldiers are under great strain as their deployments stretch out longer and longer. This is a burden on our troops, their families and our communities. We need to take action to reduce the enormous load that our operations in Iraq have placed on our service members, including those in the Guard and reserves.

The Department of Defense recently announced a decision to temporarily increase the size of the military by 30,000 troops over the next four years. The Pentagon made the decision based on emergency authority, which means that the increase in maximum strength does not allow for effective, long-term

planning and predictability among the services. While I believe that the increase is a good first step, we need to support legislation that will do substantially more to permanently relieve the burden currently placed on our overextended forces and their families.

I recently helped introduce legislation to increase the size of the Army, Marines and Air Force by roughly 5 percent over five years. The bill would add 40,000 troops to the Army, bringing it to 522,400, while the Air Force would grow by 28,700 to 388,000 and the Marines by 15,000 to 190,000. If this legislation passes, the Department of Defense would have the authority to recruit more volunteers into our armed forces. Adding two divisions to the U.S. Army, for example, could be an infusion of almost 40,000 additional troops into our armed forces that can help decrease the time any one soldier would spend on deployment.

The nature of threats against our nation — and the manner in which we respond — has changed dramatically since our Cold War-based force structure was formed. For example, our reconstruction efforts in Iraq are critical to ensure that that country will not re-emerge as a destabilizing force in the Middle East, creating an even graver threat to our security and that of our allies in the region.

If we're going to continue to be engaged around the world, and better protect our nation, we must make sure we have enough active-duty members to support our missions.

To be sure, increasing the numbers of troops will cost money. This must be a budget priority that supersedes tax cuts, new federal spending, or other pet projects of the administration or Congress. Our country has made a decision to fight an aggressive war on terrorism with a significant military component in Iraq and elsewhere. We must make the financial commitment to ensure our troops have the resources necessary to succeed.

Unless we do this, we simply cannot simultaneously make good on our commitment to Iraq, fight the threat of terror, promote stability with our forces in South Korea, for example, and also provide our hardworking service members the time they need for training and for raising their families.

Those who serve in our nation's military, and their families,

deserve better. The existing — and seemingly ever-lengthening — deployment schedule is not tenable if we hope to continue to recruit and retain the best and brightest. Increasing the size of our military will help preserve the volunteer force we have today and will improve the quality of life for all who serve.