

Changing of the Guard

Feeling betrayed in Iraq, part-time U.S. soldiers may mutiny at the polls

By Daniel Glick

First appeared in *Harper's* magazine, August, 2004

The ongoing deployment of America's "weekend warriors" – its National Guard and Reserve soldiers – represents a remarkable but little-debated shift in national military policy. Last November roughly 25 percent of the U.S. soldiers in Iraq came from the ranks of National Guard and Reserve units; today that figure is 40 percent, and is expected to rise. Since September, 2001, in service of the "War on Terrorism," more National Guard and Reserve soldiers have been called to active duty than had *cumulatively* been mobilized since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 – including the Vietnam War, the Cuban Refugee Crisis, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Gulf War I. Today's reservists serve longer tours of duty, face more deployments, and are exposed to more dangerous combat roles than at any time since the Korean War. More than 135 part-time soldiers have been killed in Iraq so far, lending a bitter double entendre to a statement by Lt. Gen. H. Steven Blum, chief of the National Guard Bureau, which oversees all reserve forces. Commenting on the changing role of the reserve soldier in the modern military, Blum said bluntly: "Weekend warrior is dead."

Since the Vietnam War, Guard and Reserve soldiers have comfortably ridden a myth, perpetuated by recruitment advertising ("Serve in Your Own Backyard"), that deployment into combat zones was an unlikely outcome of their service. Many of them – especially National Guardsmen, who are used primarily as state militia – thought they would be serving their country "one weekend a month and two weeks a year" (as the recruiting slogan went) by fighting forest fires or sandbagging cresting rivers on the home front. Even during the massive Guard and Reserve mobilization during the first Gulf War in 1991, reservists were kept largely out of harm's way by serving as rear guard support in Kuwait; not a single Guard soldier was killed in action. During the current Iraq war, however, these part-time soldiers, including mothers of five, fifty-something Vietnam veterans, poor college kids, and overweight middle-aged construction workers, have found themselves "downrange." Even members of the Guard's 147th Fighter Wing from Ellington Field, Houston – the unit in which Bush himself sporadically served – were sent into the fight in February 2003, near the Iraqi border.

Whereas President Lyndon Johnson decided that a draft was more politically palatable than widespread mobilization of the National Guard or Army Reserve during the Vietnam War, President Bush wagered that the opposite is true today. This has proved to be a risky gamble. As Bush's main rationale for invading Iraq – Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction – has failed to materialize, many reservists say they never signed up to fight a preemptive war or to preside over a chaotic and deadly occupation. Resentment is building among a significant care of these citizen-soldiers, many of whom have been thrust into situations for which they did not train or reasonably expect to experience. Their families are, in many cases, even more apoplectic at the way their loved ones have been mobilized, often without warning or proper training or equipment. In what promises to be

a close election, the 1.2 million Guard and Reserve soldiers and the many more millions of their family members represent a significant block of votes; and our President, despite his Guardsman past, may be well on his way to losing them.

As with so many of the consequences of the administration's poor post-war planning, problems with this heavy reliance on reservists were predictable. Even prior to the Iraq invasion, various federal, state, media and internal Pentagon reports signaled that the reserve component had manifold shortcomings – including questionable command ethics, retribution against whistleblowers, equipment shortages and training deficiencies. Other problems affecting readiness and morale quickly became apparent as well, from poor leadership to payroll problems. Colorado National Guard Major Ken Chavez, who in Afghanistan commanded a Special Forces unit, the Guard's elite, testified before Congress that every member of his company had had some problem with his or her pay, adding an onerous and unnecessary burden to their deployments. While battling the military's accounting bureaucracy, Chavez said, his soldiers "suffered divorces, bankruptcies, lost homes, and endured untold family problems that are far more destructive to their morale than any enemy they face in combat." The Pentagon has acknowledged, without giving firm numbers, that a troubling percentage of Reserve and Guard soldiers, who are on average older than active-duty personnel, were medically unfit for deployment. Some did not have required physical examinations; many had been passed even though they should have been disqualified from service. According to Stephen Robinson, executive director of the National Gulf War Resource Center, commanders "decided to deploy as many bodies as possible to the mobilization sites, regardless of their condition."

Medically ready or not, many Guard and Reserve troops soon found themselves downrange without a flak jacket. Part-time soldiers often train with hand-me-down equipment, such as older vehicles and weapons, and many reservists are deployed with inferior gear. Stories leaked out about how the Reserve and Guard were under-equipped and ill-trained: Reserve soldiers were less likely to be given bulletproof "Interceptor" body armor or the "up-armored" Humvees that could withstand IEDs, the ubiquitous roadside bombs of the Iraqi resistance. Guard and reserve units reported being short on everything from communications radios to navigation equipment, from ammunition to food and water. And although regular Army personnel were also short on Kevlar body armor, fortified Hummers and radios, Guard and Reserve units had it worse. This disparity became particularly galling as the roles of active duty soldiers and reservists began to blur in action, even as the differences in the two groups' training, equipment and benefits became more pronounced. One Oregon National Guard soldier I spoke with – a mechanic – was told to man a 50-caliber machine gun juryrigged on top of a Vietnam-era truck, but wasn't given a single round of ammunition during a dangerous convoy. "They told me just to look mean," the soldier said.

One disturbing result is that during the first nine months of the Iraq war, a disproportionate percentage of these Guard and Reserve soldiers were sick or injured. Although fatalities and wounded-in-action rates for guard and reserves are roughly similar to active duty personnel, the rate of what the military calls "DNBI" – disease and non-battle injuries – is nearly double among Reserve soldiers. The high rate of DNBI, which includes everything from accidents to pneumonia, is likely due to a combination of factors. Older soldiers tend to have more pre-existing medical conditions that are exacerbated in combat; they are more vulnerable to accidents because they train less frequently; and once they

return home, medical problems mount. The Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs reported that in post-deployment assessments, Reserve and Guard units show a 50 percent higher incidence of "health concerns," a 65 percent higher incidence of "medical/dental problems," and a 33 percent higher incidence of "mental health concerns" than did active duty soldiers.

In the 2000 election, George Bush won critical last-minute votes from absentee military ballots, which tilted heavily in his favor. This time around, though, the military vote may not be so monolithic. In an unscientific poll taken by *Stars and Stripes* in October, 2003, nearly 50 percent of part-time reservists and National Guard ranked their morale as "low" or "very low," compared with one third of regular Army troops, 14 percent of Marines, and six percent of Air Force personnel who were surveyed. The low morale was compounded after stories surfaced about reservists who were warehoused in abominable conditions and placed on "medical hold" – a maddening bureaucratic limbo – at stateside bases like Ft. Knox, Kentucky and Ft. Stewart, Georgia. "There is no doubt about the resentment of reservists, their families, and their employers regarding the repeated and extended deployments they have experienced," says David Segal, director of the Center for Research on Military Organization at the University of Maryland. "This is the first war I can remember in which the nucleus of the antiwar movement was found not on college campuses but in reserve households."

Although it has become a political truism that soldiers vote Republican, one wonders if the newest swing voter bloc to capture political operatives' imagination will not be the NASCAR Dad, but the Reservist's Wife. Terri Lee, whose husband Sgt. Timothy Lee was deployed with the Tennessee Army National Guard's 1175th Transport Company out of Tullahoma, offers a litany of indignities that soldiers in her husband's company suffered, including poor equipment, an extension of duty past the promised year, and delays in receiving their \$1,000-a-month extension bonus. As a result, she says, the home-front families have been displaying admirable unit cohesion, though perhaps not in the fashion that the commander-in-chief would prefer. "All of the other wives have said, 'I won't vote for Bush again,'" says Terri. (As for her own vote, Terri, who felt that Kerry slighted National Guard in his criticisms of Bush's service record, says she hasn't yet made up her mind.) Sheila Karpesky, whose 39-year old husband Sgt. Kevin F. Karpesky is a member of the 28th Signal Battalion, a National Guard unit in Pennsylvania, says her husband recently changed his voter registration to Democrat after voting for Bush in the last election. She says she recently fielded a request from her husband, an ex-Marine, for a number of absentee ballots to be sent to Iraq for like-minded buddies.

Even after the current wave of Reserve and Guard soldiers return home from Iraq, the aftereffects of their service will continue to mount. How those soldiers and their families will weigh that experience at the polls in November remains an open question. But their tours of duty are likely to make an indelible imprint on these men and women who expected, as their president did thirty-five years ago, to serve their country without having to witness the horrors of war firsthand.

###