

Support the troops

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Supporting the troops in Iraq and Afghanistan ought to be more than a political slogan. It ought to mean something. And that something ought to start first and foremost with the military itself.

Troops at the front, and certainly many of their families, have complained almost since the beginning of the Iraq war in March 2003 about the shortages and the poor quality of body armor and armor for their vehicles. Soldiers were dying, losing limbs and suffering other major trauma because of it, they pleaded. You may recall the inadequate response of Donald Rumsfeld, then the secretary of defense, to an American soldier who in December 2004 dared ask about the lack of armored Humvees. "You go to war with the army you have," Rumsfeld said, " ... not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time."

Such arrogance might have been understandable had Iraq not been a war of choice in the first place, and if the Pentagon had not had months or even years to better prepare for a war of insurgency.

Sadly, even when armor-fortified Humvees did start making it to Iraq, they proved not enough to protect troops on the ground from the increasingly powerful roadside bombs planted by the insurgents.

And now we learn from an Associated Press report published by The San Diego Union-Tribune on Saturday that, according to an internal military study obtained by the AP, Marine Corps bureaucrats in Washington refused an urgent request from a battlefield commander in 2005 for blast-resistant vehicles known as MRAPs, which are far more effective at protecting troops. As a result, the study concluded, hundreds of Marines have been killed or wounded.

The study was conducted and written by Franz J. Gayl, a civilian Marine Corps official. Because he has previously clashed with Marine brass and last year filed for whistle-blower protection, some will no doubt question his motives and the integrity of his study. But it was based, according to the AP, on Marine Corps documents, e-mails, briefing charts, memos, congressional testimony and news articles.

The study said the Marine Corps was guilty of "gross mismanagement" in delaying deliveries of MRAPs for more than two years. The reason for the delay was insulting - money. The 40-ton vehicles cost up to \$1 million each and, the study said, represented a financial threat to other programs attempting to develop lighter vehicles. Never mind, it seems, that American troops were being killed and wounded in the meantime. And never mind that the lighter vehicles were still years from being ready.

To his great credit, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who succeeded Rumsfeld in December 2006, made the MRAP the top acquisition priority for the Pentagon beginning last May, finally shifting the shipment of the

vehicles to Iraq into high gear.

It was the common-sense act of a defense secretary who knows that support for the troops must start with him.

Reprinted from The San Diego Union-Tribune. CNS

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