

Don't stiff our troops

by The St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Last fall, Congress approved spending \$72 million to pay \$500-a-month bonuses to military personnel whose active-duty service has been involuntarily extended by so-called "stop-loss" orders.

Nearly six months later, not a dime has been spent. Robert M. Gates, the secretary of Defense, is furious, but the Pentagon's bureaucracy is impermeable. The money can't be spent until the Army — the 13,100 troops affected all are Army personnel — submits a plan. And so far, the plan is lost in bureaucratic limbo.

Last week, according to a report in *The Army Times*, Army manpower officers floated a proposal: How about \$250 a month instead of \$500? Senior defense and congressional officials rejected the compromise. Gates is said to be putting pressure on Army personnel staffers to fund the entire bonus program.

It's not that the Army is being cheap. It's just that its ranks have been severely stressed by six years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq. In particular, the supply of experienced captains and senior sergeants in combat branches and some military specialties has been depleted by repeated tours of war zones.

This is true not only in the active-duty Army, but also in National Guard and Army Reserve units. When Guard and Reserve units are on active duty, there's no supply of replacement officers and non-coms in the pipeline. Some 4,400 Guardsmen and 1,450 Reservists are serving under stop-loss orders.

Losing experienced personnel in the middle of a combat tour can seriously damage a unit's effectiveness. Since 2003, the Army has been issuing stop-loss orders for officers and non-coms on combat tours: If your enlistment runs out while your unit is deployed, you can't leave.

The economic downturn has helped overall Army recruiting, but new soldiers need experienced leaders when they're deployed. Despite offers of re-enlistment bonuses that can run as high as \$35,000 for a battle-tested captain, too many of those experienced leaders and their non-coms are deciding to leave the Army.

One reason the Army has been slow to pay the stop-loss bonuses is that \$500 a month, over a five- or six-month period, can make a re-enlistment bonus less attractive. If a soldier has extra money in the bank, maybe he doesn't sign up for another three years.

Gates and President Barack Obama have said they want to end the stop-loss program altogether. The size of the active-duty Army has been increasing since 2006, but for at least another year, as U.S. combat brigades in

Iraq gradually are withdrawn, key personnel in some units will deploy under stop-loss orders.

For example, the headquarters unit of the 82nd Airborne Division has been ordered to Afghanistan. Even though some key leaders in that division already have pulled three tours in Iraq, they might have to pull the entire 12-month tour even if their enlistments expire while they're overseas.

The fundamental problem is that the war in Iraq has gone on too long, leaving the Army severely stressed and depleted. Now, as that war winds down, manpower needs in Afghanistan are being ramped up. Sooner rather than later, the Army is going to need time to rebuild.

In the meantime, the troops who bear the repeated deployments are owed not just our thanks, but also the promise that their service won't be abused. Pay them what they're owed and pray they get home safely to spend it.

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