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## HOUSE COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

*U.S. House of Representatives*

Washington, DC 20515-6035

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ERIN C. CONATON, STAFF DIRECTOR

December 10, 2009

The Honorable Robert M. Gates  
Department of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Admiral Mike Mullen, USN  
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff  
9999 Joint Staff Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20318-9999

Dear Secretary Gates and Admiral Mullen:

It was a pleasure to speak with both of you last week when you appeared before the House Armed Services Committee, and we appreciate you being candid with the committee.

We have always been ardent supporters of our fighting men and women. However, our primary concern has always been that when we ask these young people to take up arms and defend our country, we need to ensure they have the equipment they need to complete the task.

Recently, we traveled to Germany and Italy to meet with troops that were training to deploy, as well as to visit with our recovering wounded warriors. It was on this trip that we had the opportunity to sit and chat, one on one, with our troops and ask them firsthand about any concerns they had -- and we were greatly troubled by what we heard from the soldiers of the 503<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment and the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade Combat Team.

We heard numerous complaints about the Army small assault packs and the large rucksacks that are standard issue for our soldiers. We were told that the new rucksack is made of plastic, is not comfortable, and is not effective in combat situations. Soldiers are carrying large amounts of weight, and they told me the plastic straps are cutting off circulation to their arms and hands, making it virtually impossible to fire their weapons. Many of the soldiers we spoke to are using personal funds to purchase backpacks from Tactical Tailor and Everly Stock, feeling that their equipment is of superior quality. Why was the plastic rucksack considered a better alternative?

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In regard to training, we were told that soldiers are being taken straight from boot camp and sent to Iraq and Afghanistan without extensive training here at home. Many of the NCOs we spoke to would like to see their soldiers receive more training before deployment, a sentiment with which we strongly agree. Is this a common practice now? And will the upcoming surge into Afghanistan exacerbate this situation?

The Readiness Subcommittee has been briefed on the camouflage shortcomings of the current Army Combat Uniform in the Afghanistan theater and how it does more to put our soldiers in harm's way than to protect them. The 503<sup>rd</sup> and 173<sup>rd</sup> soldiers felt that Multicam was more effective. Please provide us an update on what the Army is doing to address the camouflage deficiency in the ACU.

Many soldiers from these units also complained about the less-than-sufficient clothing allowance given to them, stating they have to pay out of pocket to purchase uniforms when the harsh environment in Afghanistan forces them to buy multiple replacements. What is being done to find a more durable uniform or to increase the soldiers' basic clothing allowance?

The last issue is the M4 rifle. We have had many concerns with this weapon, especially after details of the Battle of Wanat were released with multiple reports of the M4 jamming. Even though these weapons routinely rank lower than other military weapons in testing, they are still being issued as the Army's weapon of choice. Please provide us information on what the Army is doing to procure a superior replacement rifle, such as those used by our Special Operations forces.

These soldiers are fighting today on the front lines in Afghanistan, and we implore you to take their concerns to heart and see what we can all do to give them the tools they need. We want to work with you to help all of our brave men and women accomplish the task that has been asked of them so that they can safely return home to their family and loved ones.

We look forward to your response to our concerns.

Very truly yours,



IKE SKELTON  
Chairman



SOLOMON ORTIZ  
Chairman, Subcommittee on Readiness

IS/SO: vp

cc: Secretary John McHugh  
General George Casey, USA