



After wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, rethinking how National Guard members are deployed

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With the final military withdrawal from Afghanistan underway, a few state legislators in the U.S. are reconsidering the use of their National Guard units for undeclared foreign wars, like the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nearly half of the troops deployed to both countries over the past 20 years were from the National Guard and Reserves. Special correspondent Mike Cerre reports.

Judy Woodruff, PBS anchor: With the final military withdrawal from Afghanistan under way, a few state legislators are reconsidering the use of their National Guard units for undeclared foreign wars, like the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nearly half of the troops deployed to Iraq and both countries over the past 20 years were from the National Guard and Reserves. Special correspondent Mike Cerre looks now at how some National Guardsmen themselves are seeking to limit the deployment of units like theirs unless Congress formally declares a state of war.

Sgt. 1st Class John Braswell, Alabama National Guard:

If they're waving at you, you know they're not holding a gun.

Mike Cerre:

I first met Sergeant 1st Class John Braswell on his year-long deployment to Afghanistan with his Alabama National Guard Special Forces unit in 2002.

Sgt. 1st Class John Braswell:

I work for a software company in the real world, so it's a little different. I guess I was

a little surprised that they would activate a National Guard Special Forces battalion almost right at the outset of the conflict.

Mike Cerre:

So were his two sons and wife, Laura.

Laura Braswell, wife of SFC John Braswell:

He took a significant pay cut. And we were sort of forced to sell our home. Up until that point, we had done two weeks in the summer and one weekend every month.

Mike Cerre:

Former Idaho National Guardsmen Dan McKnight and Kent Burns both reenlisted on 9/11, expecting and anxious for their National Guard units to be sent to Afghanistan, but not, as it turned out, multiple tours to both Iraq and Afghanistan the past 20 years.

Dan McKnight, Founder and Chairman, BringOurTroops Home.US and DefendThe Guard.US:

And so I became very disillusioned. And I came home confused. I came home injured. I came home broke. I came home to a broken

marriage.

Mike Cerre:

Idaho National Guard units have been deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq 15 of the last 20 years since 9/11.

Kent Burns, Guard veteran:

I expected this all to be over. But in the last 18 to 20 years, it just keeps continuing, and the mission for the National Guard needs to be changed.

Mike Cerre:

Traditionally, the National Guard has been activated by their states for domestic emergencies, like natural disasters, civil disturbances, and the current COVID medical crisis. But they also provide support and backup to the active-duty military for overseas operations.

Combat radio clip:

Our guys are getting shot up. We need those buildings dropped now.

Mike Cerre:

But since 9/11, the National Guard has sent more of its units overseas than it has since World War II, some as frequently as once every three years. In 2005, over

Mike Cerre (continued):

half of the troops serving in Iraq were from the National Guard, according to the National Guard Bureau and its operations director, Brigadier General Nick Ducich.

Brig. Gen. Nick Ducich, National Guard Bureau:

In the past 20 years, the major transition has been from a strategic reserve to a combat, operationally focused reserve capability.

Mike Cerre:

The federal government pays the cost to recruit, train and equip the state's National Guards. Their commanders and chiefs, the state governors, are obligated to make them available in the case of national security threats. What's at issue here is, what's a national security threat, in this, the age of undeclared wars, which every American war has been since World War II?

Lt. Gov. Janice McGeachin, R-Idaho:

Well, then, fine. If it's a real true threat to the United States and our interests, again, as it's stated in our Constitution, then Congress should do their job, and they should have a formal declaration of war.

Mike Cerre:

Idaho Lt. Gov. Janice McGeachin supports legislative initiatives to restrict the use of a state's National Guard in undeclared wars, which she believes are not included in Article 1 of the Constitution allowing federal use of state's militia for executing the laws of the nation, suppressing insurrections and repelling invasions.

Dan McKnight:

It should be difficult to take our state militias and our active-duty military into war. Without a congressional declaration of war, we have no business fighting in these foreign overseas misadventures. And so I don't see it as an anti-war. I see it as a pro-Constitution measure.

Mike Cerre:

McKnight, both a former Marine and Army veteran, launched the Defend the Guard initiative, with other veterans and politicians from both parties to limit foreign deployments of National Guard troops only to wars formally declared by Congress. The 2001 war on terror resolution has allowed the past four presidents to send National Guard troops to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq without a

declaration of war.

Dan McKnight:

Citizen soldiers were always meant to be the ones that defended America, not a standing army. And so, if America needs to go to war, we should do it the right way.

Rep. Ben Adams, R-Idaho:

Now is the time to push back, to lay claim to our sovereignty as a state.

Mike Cerre:

Idaho state Rep. Ben Adams, a former Marine and Afghanistan veteran, is trying to get the Defend the Guard initiative passed in Idaho, as are legislators in 30 other states, with little success thus far in getting it to a vote.

Brig. Gen. David McGinnis, Ret., former Department of Defense official:

The state restrictions are highly unlikely, because there's already a Supreme Court decision, *Perpich vs. U.S.*, that dates back to the Reagan Administration.

Mike Cerre:

Former National Guard Bureau Deputy Chief of Staff Brig. Gen. David McGinnis doesn't believe the states

Mike Cerre (continued):

will be able to limit federal control of the National Guard.

Brig. Gen. David McGinnis:

Once the Guard is mobilized for federal service in the context of any law or mobilized for training, federal training, as a reserve of the Army or Air Force, the states have no control over what the president or the Department of Defense does with those units once they're in that status.

Dan McKnight:

It's hindered them because they're sometimes gone from their communities in times of real emergencies stateside, like the Louisiana National Guard being gone during Katrina, or the Oregon National Guard being pulled off the fires last season in the worst firefighting season in their state history and sent to Afghanistan with the helicopters that they should've been fighting fires with.

Mike Cerre:

In the past, people who sign up for the National Guard really weren't thinking about going active duty or being deployed or certainly

going to war. Has that all changed?

Kent Burns:

It definitely has changed. In the old days, it was join the National Guard to avoid Vietnam. After 9/11, to me, that all changed. We were all in it to win it and to be war fighters and not just a state mission. Now I feel like we have to bring that back.

Mike Cerre:

The Idaho National Guard declined our interview request, but sent us its rebuttal for giving the state the option to limit overseas deployments. It included the possibility of cutting federal military funding for not making the state's units available when called on.

Lt. Gov. Janice McGeachin:

Why would the federal government pull all that away? It wouldn't make any sense. So, I think it's time to start asserting our sovereignty as states.

Mike Cerre:

Gov. Brad Little, commander in chief of Idaho's National Guard, disagrees. He's not willing to risk the loss of over \$200 million a year of funding from the National

Guard, the state's fourth largest employer.

Dan McKnight:

And we're not crying for mercy here. We're not asking that the National Guard be released from this obligation. We're just simply asking that they do it the right way.

Brig. Gen. David McGinnis:

The president has enough act of force if they're properly organized to react initially to any situation. And that would give him time to talk and — talk to the congressional leaders and get an authorization from Congress.

Mike Cerre:

Nearly 20 years since John Braswell was part of the first wave of National Guard troops deployed to Afghanistan, there's general agreement that these combat deployments, constitutional or otherwise, have made the National Guard better trained, equipped, and more integrated with the active duty military than previous weekend warriors.

For the "PBS NewsHour," this is Mike Cerre in Boise, Idaho.