

United States Senate
Office of the Democratic Leader
Washington, DC 20510-7010

January 30, 2004

The Honorable Donald Rumsfeld
Secretary
U.S. Department of Defense
The Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Since the start of the conflict in Iraq, I have received a steady stream of reports that a significant number of the men and women we are putting in harm's way to protect this nation have not been provided with the best equipment available. The only thing more troubling than the reports themselves is the fact that they persist to this day – nearly 10 months after our troops began their effort to topple Saddam Hussein, and well after Defense Department officials provided assurances to Congress that these shortfalls would be addressed.

The experiences of South Dakota's National Guard units offer a case in point. Despite the fact that two of these units, the 740th Transportation Company and the 727th Transportation Company, have been stationed in the Iraq theater since April, some soldiers in these and other units still lack the most effective body armor. These units are required to run regular supply convoys into Iraq from their bases in Kuwait. The lack of body armor forces some troops to obtain this essential equipment from other unit members believed to be at less risk. As a result, some troops in these units are equipped with ill-fitting body armor sized for another individual, while others are left without body armor altogether.

In addition, I have been informed that two other South Dakota Army Guard units, comprised of roughly 900 soldiers, face similar shortages. Soldiers from both the Second Battalion of the 147th Field Artillery and the 153rd Engineer Battalion currently lack body armor. Although the Defense Department has promised these soldiers they will receive body armor, they are scheduled to depart for the Iraq theater imminently and still lack this vital equipment.

My concern about this troubling state of affairs is heightened by the fact that the problem is not caused by a lack of resources. As you know, with my support, Congress provided an additional \$420 million for the purchase of additional body armor vests and armor plates in the FY2004 supplemental appropriations bill and the regular FY2004 defense appropriations bill. We were assured at that time that this funding level was sufficient to ensure that every soldier in a combat theater would be equipped with the best body armor money can buy, and that the equipment would be provided quickly.

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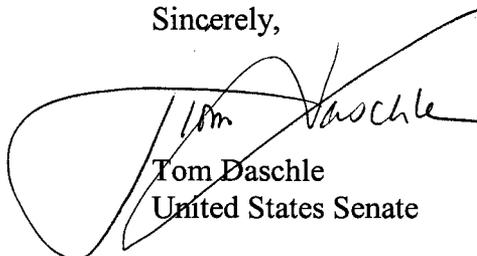
Despite these assurances, the experiences of the South Dakota units and others demonstrate this problem persists. For the security of our troops and the peace of mind of their families, this problem must be addressed and resolved immediately.

Body armor has become a standard requirement for every soldier, no less critical than a helmet, boots, and a rifle. Every soldier needs this life-saving gear. We asked these men and women to put their lives on the line for their country. They are responding with patriotism and professionalism. We fail to reciprocate their dedication and commitment when we send them into danger without adequate protection. I ask you to take all necessary steps to ensure all our troops receive body armor and other vital protective equipment immediately.

Thank you for consideration of this urgent request on behalf of our nation's armed forces. I would appreciate regular updates on this matter as you proceed.

With best wishes, I am

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tom Daschle", with a large, sweeping flourish that loops back under the name.

Tom Daschle
United States Senate

TAD/cah