

Larson Demands Investigation Into Delays of Body Armor for U.S.

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Larson Demands Investigation Into Delays of Body Armor for U.S. Troops

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Congressman John B. Larson Tuesday called for an immediate Congressional investigation into the Pentagon's procurement system that has led to more than a year's delay in supplying improved body armor to soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. As part of that investigation, Larson (CT-1) said that Pentagon officials, including Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, should be held liable for any findings of dereliction or wrongdoing.

"These delays are a disgrace," Larson said. "The administration has repeatedly lapsed in its duty to provide the men and women it sends into war the best equipment possible. After two years and with all the appropriate funding levels, an investigation needs to be done into why this hasn't been done. Our troops should not have to wait a day, let alone a year. Our men and women need all the protection we can offer them, and their families and the American people need to know that we're doing everything we can to protect them. If we can spend billions of dollars on the national missile defense program and the nuclear bunker buster program and tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans, there's no reason for this to be happening."

Larson said that action should be taken against Pentagon officials if the investigations yield evidence of willful neglect or incompetence. If so, those officials should resign or be dismissed, he said.

That wait for upgraded armor is symptomatic of the Pentagon's failure since the war began to adequately outfit troops with body protection, Larson said. Despite complaints from troops, their family and Congress, the Administration has dragged in acquiring and distributing the armor, he added.

"The Administration has wanted to avoid talking about timetables, but giving our troops safer body armor is one timetable that cannot be put off. It is a top priority that needs to be acted on now. If those in charge aren't standing up to that responsibility, then we need leaders who will."

A poorly-run procurement system has stalled the replacement of existing armor with thicker ceramic plates that could better protect military personnel from insurgent gunfire. Reports cited that gunfire has killed at least 325 troops, about half the number killed by bombs.

Larson has longstanding concerns about Pentagon's record of supplying body armor throughout the Iraq war. He introduced an amendment, passed in the 2004 defense spending bill, requiring the Pentagon to reimburse military personnel and family members who spent their own money for protective gear that the Pentagon had failed to supply. From the outset, troops were sent to Iraq with a shortage of armor. Larson pushed for the reimbursement measure following a 2003 forum on Iraq in East Hartford. At the forum, an East Hartford mother Pene Palifka said that her son, Bill Palifka of the CT National Guard's 248th Engineer Co., had been sent to Iraq without the "Interceptor" body armor that American troops were supposed to have been issued. Worried for her son's safety, she spent about \$1,100 to buy it for him.

The measure covered purchases through the end of 2003, since the military assured Congress that in 2004 it would supply upgraded armor to all troops – the same thicker-plated armor hanging in procurement limbo.

"So far the Pentagon's assurances have been empty," Larson said. "Our civilian leaders need to be held to their word."

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