

White House lays out National Security Agenda

John J. Kruzal, American Forces Press Service

White House web site lays out National Security Agenda

WASHINGTON, Jan. 21, 2009 – As President Barack Obama and the first family began moving into the presidential residence here yesterday, the administration unpacked a new presidential agenda on the White House’s official Web site.

Shortly after Obama took the oath of office, the president’s agenda, including Obama’s strategy for defense and Middle East policy, was uploaded to www.whitehouse.gov.

According to the agenda, the administration supports the effort begun in 2007 to increase the size of the Army by 65,000 soldiers and the Marine Corps by 27,000 to help units retrain and re-equip properly between deployments and decrease the strain on military families.

The new commander in chief also plans to create a Military Families Advisory Board to make senior policymakers and the public more aware of military families' concerns. Meanwhile, a vignette on the site about first lady Michelle Obama states that supporting military families is an issue “close to her heart,” and an issue on which she intends to focus her efforts.

Many of the policies cited online mirror the items Obama and Vice President Joe Biden endorsed on their campaign and transition Web sites.

An issue affecting both military members and their families is the policy of “stop-loss” that requires selected troops to remain in uniform after their service contracts expire. The president has promised to cease these mandatory extensions.

“Obama and Biden will end the stop-loss policy and establish predictability in deployments so that active duty and reserves know what they can and must expect,” the site states.

Another piece of Obama’s defense agenda is building defense capabilities for the 21st century by fully equipping troops -- including members of the National Guard and reserves -- for their missions,

and balancing conventional and counterinsurgency weapons systems. The president also advocates reforming a corruptible contracting process while maintaining aerial and naval capabilities, and supporting a pragmatic and cost-effective missile defense system.

Obama and Biden have vowed to build up special operations forces, civil affairs, information operations, and other units and capabilities that are in chronic short supply; to invest in foreign language training, cultural awareness, human intelligence and other needed counterinsurgency and stabilization skill sets; and to create a more robust capacity to train, equip and advise foreign security forces.

This agenda item dovetails with the administration's pledge to develop "whole-of-government" initiatives to spur global stability, in which military and civilian efforts are linked and a 25,000-strong Civilian Assistance Corps consisting of doctors, lawyers, engineers and police is formed as a deployable unit available in times of domestic or international need.

On foreign policy, the site describes the incoming administration's plans for U.S. force posturing in the Middle East: "Barack Obama and Joe Biden will responsibly end the war in Iraq so that we can renew our military strength [and] dedicate more resources to the fight against the Taliban and [al-Qaida] in Afghanistan."

With regard to U.S. force levels in Iraq, a newly enacted agreement between Washington and Baghdad sets the legal framework for a timeline of withdrawal. The status-of-forces agreement, which became effective Jan. 1, stipulates that American combat forces pull back from cities and villages to major bases by June 30, 2009.

The deal also calls for all American troops to vacate Iraq by the last day of 2011, though officials point out that a withdrawal timeline is subject to change according to political circumstances.

In Afghanistan, the Pentagon is expected to add about 25,000 additional troops over the next 12 to 18 months, according to defense officials. Some 32,000 American forces currently are deployed there.

Both Obama and Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, who replaced Donald H. Rumsfeld as then-President George W. Bush's defense secretary and whom Obama has retained as Pentagon chief, have spoken about the need to push for stronger commitment from NATO allies in Afghanistan.

During a news conference last month in the Afghan capital of Kandahar, the secretary said that some NATO allies believe they and their Afghan counterparts are holding their own in some areas of fighting.

“But I think everybody would agree that holding your own isn't good enough,” Gates said. The Obama White House, meanwhile, said it “will increase our troop levels in Afghanistan [and] press our allies in NATO to do the same.”

“America's traditional alliances, such as NATO, must be transformed and strengthened, including on common security concerns like Afghanistan, homeland security, and counterterrorism,” the Web site states.

U.S. Army War College Archives - News Article - 22 January 2009