Amendment #3186

The Need for Small Arms Modernization by the US Army

In 2007, the Army Test and Evaluation Command (ATEC) tested the reliability of the US Army's standard issue M4 carbine rifle compared to three other carbine rifles. These rifles were exposed to an extreme dust environment and then fired to compare the frequency of stoppages. The Army's M4 carbine rifle finished last in this reliability test.

The Army did not initiate this extreme dust test that examined the relative reliability of one of its most deployed small arms weapons in a relevant environment to where it was fighting. This test was only conducted after a combination of years of reports from deployed soldiers about their rifles operating in dusty and sandy environments in Iraq and Afghanistan and significant congressional and media interest in the matter. After the extreme dust test, then-Secretary of the Army Pete Geren directed the Army staff to "take all necessary actions to initiate a best value, full and open competition for carbines no later than end of fiscal year 2009." Tragically in July of 2008 at the Battle of Wanat small outpost of soldiers in Afghanistan were overrun by Taliban insurgents and suffered from failures of their M4 rifles. In November 2008, nineteen small arms manufacturers appeared at an 'Industry Day' in Virginia to showcase to the Army the advances made in small arms technology. Despite this need from the troops and the overwhelming interest of the small arms industry the Army has said that it will be 2014 at the earliest when our soldiers might get a new carbine rifle.

Dissatisfaction with the Army's current small arms weapons is not limited to the M4 carbine. In 2006, the Center for Naval Analysis issued a report stating that more than a third of all soldiers using the M249 squad automatic weapon (SAW) in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan were dissatisfied with its reliability. 30% of these soldiers experienced stoppages with their M249 while engaging the enemy in combat. At this time, the Army has no planned replacement for the M249 SAW. The same survey noted that nearly half of all users of the M9 pistol were dissatisfied with its use. There is no plan for the Army to issue replacements for the Army's decades-old designs for M9 pistols, M16 rifles, or M249 machine guns.

Unfortunately, there is no mechanism, process, or organization where the users of small arms can formally tell the Army of reliability or other concerns about their weapons. Again, the dust test regarding the carbine was conducted only after pointed congressional intervention. When soldiers notify their chain of command that there may be issues with the way their weapons are operating, they are usually told that the failure is a lack of proper maintenance. When Congress or the media asks the Pentagon why it isn't fielding new small arms weapons, it is told that there is no approved requirement for a new weapon. When tasked by the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics to assess the Department of Defense's approach to small arms and

ammunition, the Army finds that instead of procuring modern weapons more training on legacy weapons is sufficient.

While more lethal and more reliable small arms weapons exist in the commercial market and are in use by our elite special forces and allied nations, hundreds of thousands of troops in the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines must use the same legacy small arms weapons that are decades old. In the meantime, the United States continues to deploy brave men and women to combat with the same weapons that finished last in the Army's own reliability test and have high levels of dissatisfaction with their use, as noted by the Center for Naval Analysis.

Also, other Army tests and analysis, as well as ballistic testing going back to World War I, show that the current 5.56mm ammunition that is the Army and NATO standard is not the ideal ammunition for our troops engaging targets greater than 300 meters as they are in Afghanistan. The Army should be conducting robust research and analysis on the possibility of intermediate caliber ammunition that would be effective at long ranges – however the Army has no plans to follow up its initial testing with any further development of small arms ammunition to replace the 5.56mm round.

The current bureaucratic processes at the Pentagon and the Army do not serve the needs of our soldiers at war. The average age (determined by first fielding) of the current small arms weapons in use by the Army is 34 years old, with no replacement planned for two of the most deployed small arms weapons, the M16 and M249. Several of most useful and lifesaving military equipment has been acquired for our soldiers outside of the 'normal' acquisition process and include body armor, mine-resistant ambush protected (MRAP) vehicles, and personal soldier equipment through the Army's Rapid Fielding Initiative (RFI). Even the 'normal' acquisition process has succeeded in fielding multiple incremental improvements to Army tactical radios with a mix of commercial off the shelf equipment and military research and development.

The relative cost to upgrade the entire Army with new small arms weapons and ammunition is small and the benefits are great. Some of our NATO allies, with much smaller defense budgets, are able to outfit and equip their soldiers with new and modern rifles. America should always ensure that when our soldiers are sent to battle on behalf of the nation they go with the best small arms weapons and ammunition available.