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Few governors seem satisfied with Bush answer on Guard

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WASHINGTON — President Bush and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld offered private assurances to the nation's governors over plans to make cuts to the National Guard, but some governors said Monday they were still worried.

Republican and Democratic governors said discussions are just beginning on Guard units, the backbone of state emergency and homeland security response.

"No, there's no sense of hugs, handshakes and cut the cake," said Republican Mike Huckabee of Arkansas. "At least now, we're talking."

Governors went into closed-door meetings with Bush, and later with Rumsfeld and top military leaders, unified in their opposition to administration budget plans that state leaders had warned would reduce the planned force levels for the Guard. The state-controlled citizen soldiers have been heavily used by the federal government in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Bush's 2007 budget submission would support a Guard of about 333,000 citizen soldiers — the current level — rather than the 350,000 authorized by Congress. It also proposes to pay for 188,000 Army Reserve troops rather than the 205,000 authorized by Congress.

At Monday's meetings, Bush, Rumsfeld and Gen. Peter Pace, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, promised governors that the administration would find the money to cover the higher number of troops if that many are recruited, several governors said.

"I trust Peter Pace and I trust the president of the United States. They said they'd find the money and I think you can take that to the bank," said Republican Jeb Bush of Florida.

"It was a very strong commitment to all the nation's governors that they made," Republican Bob Taft of Ohio said.

Issue of safety, security

Others weren't so sure. "It's still sort of a trust-me concept here," said Democrat Tom Vilsack of Iowa. "The bottom line is, I'll believe it when I see it. No disrespect to these people, but you can have 50,000 excuses come up" for why the money isn't there.

He and other governors have repeatedly asked why the administration would tinker with the Guard when the states rely on it so heavily and the nation has put such an emphasis on homeland security.

"The reality is, we cannot keep this nation safe by keeping the states less safe," Vilsack said.

Republican Dirk Kempthorne of Idaho said governors want and need the higher number of troops, but he wasn't sure the military would make the effort to recruit that many.

Many governors said the administration could have avoided a confrontation if they had worked beforehand with state government and military leaders. "They did not do a good job of working with the adjutant generals and the governors," Kempthorne said.

The restructuring plan would consolidate the number of brigades and tailor equipment and skills to more modern needs, governors said. But individual states may see a reduction in units available for their use.

"That's another part of the consolidation of the brigades — it will create winners and losers," Jeb Bush said.

Bush did not mention the issue Monday night as he headlined a \$9.6 million fund-raiser benefiting Republican gubernatorial candidates. But he did allude to the concerns in many statehouses about when troops in Iraq — many of them from National Guard units — might come home.

"I will determine the troop levels in Iraq, one necessary to achieve victory, based upon the recommendations of our commanders, not based upon politics in Washington, D.C.," Bush said.

Little progress for Arizona, governor says after meeting

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