

# The Des Moines Register

## Our Christmas wish: Transparency as U.S. troop deployments grow abroad

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One hundred years ago, the Des Moines Register ran an editorial cartoon from Ding Darling showing Uncle Sam and others wishing “Merry Christmas” to a soldier off at war. “How much we wish them they can never know,” was the title of the Dec. 25, 1917, cartoon.

It was the first Christmas of U.S. involvement in World War I. Iowa already had lost one of its own: Merle Hay of Glidden, who was one of the first U.S. soldiers to die in the war. Darling memorialized his death in November 1917 in a cartoon titled, “Bringing the truth home to us.”

That Christmas marked a critical time. A few months before, only a few thousand U.S. troops had arrived in France. By May 1918, there would be more than a million.

A hundred Christmases later, we are thankful that the number of U.S. troops abroad is at near historic lows.

As of September, 291,000 active duty military, National Guard/Reserve and Department of Defense civilian personnel were serving abroad, according to Pentagon data.

That’s a decrease of 40 percent from September 2008, when 484,000 were stationed abroad.

This trend is changing, however, as the U.S. ramps up its global war on terror. The number of troops abroad has already increased in the last few months.

In his national security speech Dec. 18, President Donald Trump called for “massively building up our military.” What that means for foreign engagements, which he has often criticized, is unclear.

It’s not even clear how many American troops are now abroad. This month, the Pentagon acknowledged there were 2,000 U.S. troops in Syria, after long claiming there were only 500.

In October, four U.S. soldiers were killed in an ambush in Niger — surprising many Americans who had no idea that troops were engaged in military missions, including active combat, in Africa.

Americans have limited knowledge of where U.S. troops are and what they’re doing, said Emma Ashford, a research analyst at the Cato Institute. She wrote a piece called “All I Want for Christmas ... Is Information about U.S. Military Deployments.”

“We should be discussing the increase in U.S. military actions in Africa or the growth in U.S. combat troops in the Middle East, but that discussion is effectively impossible — even for the relevant congressional committees — with so little information,” she wrote.

Yes, that information must be balanced with the need for strategic secrecy to better protect troop safety. Yet Americans must be vigilant, and we should always ask how, where and why military and civilian personnel are being placed in harm's way.

In the new year, we wish for more transparency from our politicians and military leaders. As Darling said, bring the truth home to us.

And we hope for the safety for our men and women serving abroad, for the 51,000 in Japan, 47,000 in Germany, 27,000 in South Korea, 16,700 in Kuwait, 16,500 in Afghanistan, 9,000 in Iraq, and 124,000 in 175 other nations and territories — including the 29,000 people listed as serving in an “unknown” location.

May peace be with you this holiday season.