The Reserve Component Crisis Necessitates Re-Examining the Total Army Concept
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In Brief

• The reserve component has been overtaxed for decades; the most severe troubles have been experienced by the National Guard over the past two years.

• In responding to an increase in natural disasters, civil unrest and the COVID pandemic, the National Guard’s readiness has been dramatically decreased through an exhaustion of funds—and subsequent cancellation of essential training programs—that Congress has not adequately addressed.

• Guardmembers and their families are experiencing a depletion of goodwill with their civilian employers, and families are looking at indefinite and uncertain furloughs—and suspension of pay—after working overtime for months on end.

• The problematic and systemic overuse of the reserve component cannot be fixed with extra money, however good of a solution that might be for immediate problems. Its structural role in the Total Army requires a thorough analysis and revision; our military leaders must reshape and utilize it according to its original purpose of a reserve force.
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Introduction
The emergency use over the past two years of the National Guard, and, to a lesser degree, the Army Reserve, highlights significant shortcomings in the Army’s Total Force concept. During the Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA) General James McConville’s testimony to the House Appropriations Committee in May 2021, he emphasized the increasing strain that has been placed upon the National Guard during the previous two years.

The January 6 insurrection in Washington, DC, was one of many emergencies to which the National Guard has had to answer. General McConville notes that 26,000 Guardmembers from 28 states were deployed to the Capitol to help stabilize the situation and provide enduring security in Washington. In many cases, deployments to the Capitol came without notice and lasted upward of five months; the process cost the National Guard $521 million. These figures do not reflect the associated cost to Guardmembers on civilian employment. One of the most notable scenes from these months was that of Sergeant Jacob Kohut, a public-school music teacher in Virginia, who was teaching from his HMMWV during his shift breaks at the Capitol. While most civilian employers do their best to support the reserve component’s training and operations schedules, no-notice deployments, especially those that are open-ended, can naturally work against employers’ goodwill. In the post-9/11 years, as the Army has relied more on the National Guard and the Army Reserve, reserve component Soldiers are reporting that they are having much more trouble finding and maintaining civilian employment because of their service.

Increasing domestic emergencies are snowballing the problems that reserve component Soldiers face. For example, COVID-19’s impact on the National Guard straddles multiple years. Between 2020 and 2021, the National Guard has played a major role in the COVID-19 response, most notably in vaccinating 12 million American citizens. Nevertheless, the COVID deployments—some planned in short-order, while others were hasty notifications—continue to
exacerbate the inherent problems that arise when a part-time force is being used out of accordance with its natural order.

Additionally, National Guard units from across the country were mobilized and deployed to assist civilian authorities in maintaining order in the wake of the nation-wide riots that followed the death of George Floyd on 25 May 2020. The deployment’s high-water mark, 8 June 2020, saw 86,400 Guardmembers mobilized and distributed across the country.6 Between the COVID response and assistance with maintaining order at home, the 2020–2021 National Guard mobilizations are the largest since World War II.7

It is essential, when analyzing the problems facing the National Guard and the Army Reserve, that the overall contribution of the reserve component to the Total Army concept not be underestimated. The National Guard, provided with its array of combat arms units, is fully integrated into the Army’s strategy to support combatant commanders. The integration is not a zero-sum contribution to the Total Army, but an additive to any emergent requirement associated with domestic emergencies, which is at the heart of an operational reserve. At the time of this writing, the National Guard provides forces to support U.S. Army Europe-Africa Defender 21, NATO’s Kosovo Force (KFOR) peace-keeping mission and 7th Army Training Command’s Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine (JMTG-U) in Yavoriv, Ukraine. In U.S. Central Command, the National Guard provides major contributions to U.S. Army Central’s (ARCENT’s) Kuwait-based Task Force Spartan and Operation Spartan Shield. Stateside, National Guard and Army Reserve units are regular fixtures at the National Training Center (NTC) and at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC). In the past twelve months alone, two of the National Guard’s five Armored Brigade Combat Teams (ABCTs)—Mississippi’s 155th ABCT and Minnesota’s 1st ABCT, 34th Infantry Division—conducted NTC rotations. In addition, during July 2021, both NTC and JRTC conducted National Guard rotations, with Oklahoma’s 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT) training at the NTC and Arkansas’ 39th IBCT training at JRTC. Combined, these commitments spotlight only a small fraction of deployments incurred by the National Guard and the Army Reserve. Clearly, being stylized as the Army’s operational reserve does little to prevent the National Guard from being employed well beyond considerations commonly kept for a reserve.

Asking more of the reserve component Soldier than the basic “one weekend a month and two weeks a year,” has exacted a high toll on those servicemembers. Reflecting specifically on the National Guard’s level of utilization during the past two years, General McConville called the mobilizations “unprecedented.”8 This unprecedented use of the reserve component, of which the National Guard has paid the heaviest price, has had a significant and negative impact on budgetary concerns, civilian employment—and families.

The Budgetary Crisis

Speaking in 2018, General Joseph Lengyel, former chief of the National Guard Bureau, discussed the National Guard’s challenges in balancing its role as the Total Force’s operational reserve as well as fulfilling programmed training requirements, deployed responsibilities and emerging crises. He asserted that the National Guard was overstretched and was asking more of its personnel than it should of a voluntary reserve force. For context, Lengyel highlighted that the Pennsylvania National Guard’s 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team’s (SBCT’s) NTC rotation put excessive strain on several of its members, their families and their civilian employers, as many of the unit’s Soldiers spent more time than anticipated either at or supporting the
rotation. He asserted that several of the Soldiers he spoke with spent upward of 80 to 85 days, in addition to working civilian jobs, preparing for the rotation. In sum, Lengyel succinctly captured the essence of the problem facing National Guard BCTs: “Readiness takes time.”

Moving from docile strain brought about by unforecasted training requirements and into the chaos and danger of 2020, the budgetary problems facing the reserve component, and more specifically the National Guard, gained considerable amounts of steam. As already noted, existing support to combatant commands pulled a portion of money and forces from the National Guard. COVID-19, domestic mobilization to help maintain order amid ongoing protests and other natural disaster response cut into another portion of money and forces. The January 6 riot exacerbated the problem even further.

During Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth’s confirmation hearing in May 2021, Congress questioned her regarding the trouble facing the reserve component—financial concerns, civilian-military relations and retention issues—which she vowed to both look into and address. By June 2021, Secretary Wormuth cautioned that the concerns facing the reserve component are real, and that specifically the National Guard will face significant challenges to readiness for the remainder of the fiscal year, if not longer. Furthermore, Secretary Wormuth pledged to assess if the National Guard had “unreasonable or unhelpful demands” placed upon it.

General Hokanson, the chief of the National Guard Bureau, echoed Secretary Wormuth’s assertion a few days later by stating that the National Guard is all but financially insolvent for the remainder of the fiscal year. By 15 July 2021, General Hokanson directed the National Guard to pull back all unspent funds, beginning on 1 August. However, on 30 July, Congress passed H.R. 3237, the Emergency Security Supplemental Appropriations act, which allocates $1.9 billion to supplemental appropriations to the U.S. Capitol Police, the National Guard, the District of Columbia and many other institutions to cover their responses to the January 6 insurrection. The National Guard, for its part, was allocated $521 million in reimbursement. Although that money is now on its way to the National Guard, the impact of its prolonged lack—and how that will affect General Hokanson’s direction to the National Guard—remains to be seen. It is likely that many National Guard units and their soldiers will continue facing canceled training, operations and schooling and forgoing maintenance or facing intermittent parts flow for the remainder of the fiscal year to compensate for the shortage of funds—and for the amount of time Guardmembers have spent on active duty. The cumulative impact is still unclear, but all of these steps will have significant, negative, short-term effects on readiness and will have potential negative effects on long-term strategic efforts, to include retention, recruitment and emergency response capability.

Concerns of unreasonable or unhelpful demands also appear to have caught the attention of many state legislatures. At the time of this writing, 31 states are actively preparing legislation to remove the President’s power to deploy the National Guard to combat zones without a formal declaration of war. This move is not intended to serve as partisan posturing, but instead to force Congress to regain power in relation to the nation’s ability to go to war as well as to provide the States with more control over the use of their respective troops. While this measure is unlikely to result in significant change, it is noteworthy to consider, especially given the essential role that the National Guard played in the post-9/11 wars in the Middle East.

Beyond state governments, the National Guard’s budgetary shortfalls have caught the attention of at least one of the nation’s billionaires. Willis Johnson, from Tennessee, is funding a
South Dakota National Guard deployment to the U.S.-Mexico border to offset the lack of government funding. Johnson’s action has sparked significant discussion on the legality of private donors funding National Guard deployments. Nevertheless, the situation clearly demonstrates the imbalance between mission requirements and available funding; it draws into question the reserve component’s role within the Total Army, and whether the Army is appropriately using its operational reserve.

The Total Army Concept and Its Inherent Challenges

Since its unveiling in October 2008, the DoD’s Total Force exists to improve the alignment between active duty components and their reserve component counterparts. To that end, DoD directed the services to manage their respective National Guard and Reserves as an operational force, and for each service to employ its active duty and reserve component as an integrated whole, governed by interchangeable policies and procedures. Furthermore, the policy provides a series of conditions to support its requirement for the reserve component to exist as an operational force. First, the reserve component provides the Total Force capabilities and depth—operational and strategic—that the active component does not provide on its own. Second, the reserve component, as an operational force, must be able to contribute to a full range of missions in a manner that supports the Army, its contributions to combatant commands and all other participant parties. Third, and strategically, the reserve component provides depth through its ability to support the National Defense Strategy. Finally, the reserve component contributes to homeland defense and defense support to civilian authorities missions.

The Total Army concept, enacted by the collective contributions of the active component, National Guard and the Army Reserve, allows the Army to achieve the Total Force policy. Within the Total Army, the reserve component provides 75 percent of the Army’s support units and 41 percent of its combat units. Within the reserve component, support units are split between the National Guard and the Army Reserve, but the National Guard owns nearly all of the reserve component’s combat units. Furthermore, the National Guard serves as the Army’s operational reserve.

Challenges exist within this configuration—the past two years have brought those problems front and center. First, the National Guard’s designation as a reserve is inaccurate. A reserve is a collection of troops that are withheld from continual commitment in order to maintain their availability for critical moments that may arise in a given situation. Furthermore, once a reserve is committed, it is no longer a reserve, but a utilized force, and it often becomes the main effort. An operational reserve, specifically, is “An emergency reserve of men and/or materiel established for the support of a specific operation.” Given the National Guard’s full integration in Army plans and operations at home and across the globe, it is clear that the Guard is neither a reserve, nor an emergency employment force. Therefore, one of two things needs to happen: the language that defines the reserve component needs clarification to accurately reflect reality, or the Army needs to align its use of the reserve component with its language.

The National Guard’s force structure likely contributes to its misuse as an operational reserve. The National Guard maintains five ABCTs (29 percent of the Army’s heavy force), two SBCTs (25 percent of the Army’s SBCTs) and 20 IBCTs (61 percent of the Army’s light force). The weight of combat forces in the National Guard makes it an ideal employment consideration, especially when trying to ease the burden on active duty units, and thus the burden of operational plans and exercises is spread across the Total Army. Doing so, however, nullifies the National
Guard’s standing as the Army’s operational reserve. Instead, the National Guard is a committed force and just another pool of available resources. Yet, by committing the National Guard to exercises and operations at its current investment level, the Army is not only nullifying its operational reserve, but is also reducing the nation’s domestic emergency response capability. Funds, time, readiness and the goodwill of civilian employers are all consumed by these exercises and operations, leaving little room for the flexibility that is necessary in the event of emergencies.

Beyond the allure of the National Guard’s combat formations, force structure costs must also be considered when analyzing the National Guard’s place within the Total Army. The operations and support costs for a National Guard ABCT are approximately $910 million a year. With five ABCTs, the National Guard’s operations and support costs—just to maintain and train those formations—is quite high. The same holds true for the National Guard’s two SBCTs, which cost $850 million per year in operations and support funds. On the other hand, the IBCT offers a much cheaper alternative to ABCTs and SBCTs, coming in at $780 million per year. Transitioning one or more of the National Guard’s ABCTs or SBCTs to an IBCT could save the National Guard considerable money. Aside from money, individual and collective training in IBCTs is simpler than in ABCTs or SBCTs because the resource requirements are not as extensive nor as large. As a result, it is less challenging to train IBCT formations than it is ABCTs or SBCTs, making training better suited to short drill weekends and summer collective training.

On the other hand, emergencies generate a reciprocal impact on funds, time, readiness and the goodwill of civilian employers. These resources are vital to the reserve component’s ability to function within the Total Army, and, in an environment in which those resources are very much competing in a zero-sum game, each mobilization and employment in support of an emergency further erodes them.

Looking beyond the immediate, assumptions must be made about the future. Climate change is already having tangible effects on the country. This includes hurricanes and flooding in coastal regions, as well as increased frequency and duration of wildfires in the Pacific and Mountain West. Intense rains and subsequent floods, many of which climate scientists attribute to climate change, ravaged Western Europe during June and July 2021, leaving ruin in their wake. Many cities across Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, and the Netherlands are currently underwater or digging out from the effects of flooding. China, on the other hand, is experiencing “once in a 1,000 years” rainfall, which experts are also attributing to climate change. For example, Zhengzhou, the capitol of China’s Henan province, received 24 inches of rain—traditionally a year’s accumulation—within a three-day period in July 2021. Although these examples are not in the United States, modeling suggests that similar situations are probable along American coastal and river basin areas.

Moreover, extremism, which does not appear to be losing its grip on certain swaths of American society, could result in ever-increasing instances of domestic unrest. Couple the potential impacts of climate change, routine patterns of annual emergency response and extremism with the reserve component’s position in existing Army plans and operations, and it is easy to see that its placement in the Total Army needs to be reassessed, and that adjustments are required to ensure that the nation maintains a credible and capable emergency response force.

**Recommendations**

Given the gravity of the situation facing the reserve component—the National Guard’s financial shortfalls, the high operational tempo, the breach of trust with Guardmembers,
Reservists and their families and employers—it is time to make meaningful changes. First, the Department of the Army needs to conduct a fresh analysis of the Total Army to assess how it can restructure the concept to return the Reserve Component to more of a reserve than a perpetually committed force. Second, the Department of the Army needs to conduct an honest and in-depth assessment of the reserve component’s force structure to determine more cost-effective organizational structures that can still support the Total Army.

Adjusting the Total Army

Throwing money at the reserve component would address several immediate concerns facing the National Guard and Army Reserve. However, that solution is short-sighted and does nothing to address the underlying issues eroding the reserve component’s readiness. First, money is a hard constraint and cannot be quickly generated outside of normal and emergency budget processes. If the funds are dried up, the funds are dried up. Therefore, that option quickly turns into a non-starter.

The money option does almost nothing to address the root cause of the reserve component’s problems, which is the byproduct of its operational tempo. Its operational tempo is advanced by its programmed contributions within the Total Army construct and its reactionary support to national emergencies. In short, the more the National Guard is dedicated to programmed missions, like Defender 21 or NTC rotations, the less it is ready for emergency response. Further, the more it is used for emergency response, the less it is ready for programmed missions. The bottom line is that readiness is governed by hard constraints—availability of Soldiers, availability of funds and operational readiness of personnel and equipment—and as those components are consumed, they cannot quickly or easily be reproduced. The use of a standard wooden pencil provides a good analogy to assist in the understanding of readiness.

A pencil fresh out of the box must be sharpened to make it ready for use. Sharpening a pencil increases its readiness, yet it depletes the pencil because the process of sharpening paradoxically consumes the hard constraints that make it a pencil. Furthermore, routine use consumes the pencil’s readiness, requiring sharpening at a comparable rate to that of its use. Before long, the reciprocation of employment and sharpening completely depletes the pencil and it is no longer a useful tool for writing. Moreover, the more frequently a pencil is used, the more quickly it approaches exhaustion and the threshold of no longer being a useful tool.

The pencil metaphor is a helpful heuristic for understanding the reserve component and how its increasingly high operational tempo, both programmed and emergency response, creates the problems facing the National Guard and Army Reserve in recent years. These problems are not isolated events; they are the byproduct of the reserve component making up two-thirds of the Total Army, of how that two-thirds fits within the Total Army’s force structure and of the narrative surrounding the Total Army.

During her confirmation hearing, Secretary of the Army Wormuth pledged support for the Total Army concept. Nevertheless, the fact remains that, left unchecked, the continued application of the Total Army concept will generate similar results in the face of increasing requirements. Therefore, a net assessment of the Total Army concept is required. The assessment should balance facts and assumptions and should answer hard questions, such as, what is the reserve component actually for, and does the Department of the Army’s current employment strategy support that end?
The purpose of this sub-section is not to conduct the assessment itself, but to succinctly highlight glaring issues that can be used to advance the discussion. From the standpoint of facts, the reserve component’s programmed employment is not in keeping with the ethos of a reserve, i.e., an uncommitted force kept aside for use in the event of an emergency. The reserve component, as the summer NTC and JRTC schedule demonstrates, is fully integrated within the Total Army’s force employment plans. The money, personnel and materiel readiness—and the goodwill of civilian employers consumed during integrated operations such as these—cannot be recouped and used later for emergencies. As such, the Department of the Army must also assess the feasibility of lessening requirements on the reserve component to better align it as a reserve. For example, if decreasing a few brigades supporting USARAF’s Defender exercise increases the reserve component’s readiness and flexibility to support stateside emergencies, then the decrease is worth what it provides to the Total Army and to the nation as an operational reserve.

Furthermore, in those instances that the reserve component still warrants employment, mobilization opportunities should be synchronized off-cycle from peak emergency periods. For instance, wildfire and hurricane season—two of the reserve component’s busiest call-up periods—is generally between the early summer and late fall. Flooding, both an effect of hurricane season and melting polar ice, is poised to become an increasing, persistent and tangible concern in American coastal regions within the next ten years. Furthermore, research indicates that, since 1950, humidity has decreased throughout the American Southwest, making the soil drier and contributing to the slow erosion of water stocks, both of which are contributing to the increasing frequency of regional wildfires during the summer months. Additionally, the World Meteorological Organization points to climate change as the proximate cause of the intense heat wave that has ravaged the Pacific Northwest and large portions of Canada during the summer of 2021. These problems will continue as the population, and the accompanying necessity for water, increases in the semi-arid western region of the country. Indeed, eleven of the nation’s top fifteen fastest-growing cities are located in semi-arid areas and Texas. Routine and frequent utilization of the reserve component, therefore, should be minimized from May through September in order to retain the funds and force necessary to assist during these periods of emergency. Reserve component utilization during this period should be limited to drill weekend, summer training and individual Soldier training required for promotion and unit readiness. Not having a ready reserve component, with the available funds it needs to address emergencies, is a breach of trust on many levels—perhaps none more important than with the taxpayers who fund the Total Army.

**Force Structure Adjustments**

The Reserve Component’s force structure contributes to its routine use abroad. The National Guard, for instance, maintains eight division headquarters, five ABCTs, two SBCTs and twenty IBCTs. This equates to 42 percent of the Army’s division headquarters, 31 percent of the Army’s ABCTs, 25 percent of the Army’s SBCTs and 61 percent of the Army’s IBCTs. Coupled with the reserve component maintaining 75 percent of the Army’s support units, this all but guarantees use above and beyond that expected of a reserve. ARCENT’s Task Force Spartan, which right now consists of Texas’s 36th Infantry Division (division-level headquarters), California’s 40th Combat Aviation Brigade, Kansas’s 130th Field Artillery Brigade and West Virginia’s 111th Engineer Brigade, among several other Reserve Component
units, epitomizes this idea. Vermont’s 86th IBCT, on the other hand, recently replaced Minnesota’s 2nd Brigade, 34th Infantry Division, as the command authority for NATO’s KFOR. Elements from Washington State’s 81st SBCT are deployed in support of USAEUR-AF and 7th Army Training Command’s Joint Multi-National Training Group-Ukraine (JMTG-U), which exists to assist the Ukrainian armed forces to train and equip while supporting combat training center-type rotations. The JMTG-U, like Task Force Spartan, KFOR, and many lesser-known Army requirements, is almost always filled with a National Guard brigade combat team.

Mississippi’s 155th ABCT, since its deployment to Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) III in 2004–2005, is a fixture in the Total Army’s ABCT employment. For example, it again deployed to OIF from 2009–2010, and to Kuwait in support of Task Force Spartan from July 2018 to March 2019. At the time, the Kuwait mission was sold as one of the largest National Guard armored force deployments in a decade, deploying over 3,500 Guardmembers to the Middle East. However, North Carolina’s 30th ABCT, which replaced the 155th ABCT as the main combat force within Task Force Spartan in March 2019, exceeded 4,200 deployed Guardmembers. In addition to serving in Kuwait, the Soldiers supporting Task Force Spartan also saw service in Syria and Iraq. Moreover, extended training periods also feature into the 155th ABCT’s service record. Since 2017, it has conducted two NTC rotations, to include completing its most recent rotation in June 2021, which does not account for the mobilization periods at Fort Hood, Fort Bliss and Camp Shelby.

The experiences of the 30th ABCT are similar to those of the 155th ABCT. The 30th ABCT’s citizen-Soldiers deployed to OIF in 2004 and 2009 prior to 2019’s Operation Spartan Shield deployment. In the period ahead of Spartan Shield, the 30th ABCT responded to Hurricane Florence while participating in its training regimen to prepare it for employment in the Middle East. The point in highlighting the 155th and the 30th ABCTs is to suggest that this level of operational tempo is a significant ask for “part-time” Soldiers, their families and their civilian employers. In fact, this level of integration likely exceeds the bounds of what should be asked of both an operational reserve and the reserve component.

Restructuring the National Guard might help assuage the financial problems, time commitments and breach of trust with its Soldiers, families and civilian support network, all of which are significantly impacting the reserve component’s readiness. Configured differently, the reserve component might not find itself so heavily integrated into force employment charts across U.S. Army Forces Command and the combatant commands. Many options exist, or are feasible, to support restructuring. For instance, realigning the National Guard into a regimental system could help ease the burden on the reserve component, while still training and maintaining combat arms units to fill the Army’s operational reserve requirement. Transitioning National Guard ABCTs and SBCTs into light infantry and artillery regiments, while eliminating expensive organizations, such as armor and Stryker units, would simplify training and would significantly decrease operations and maintenance costs while maintaining combat capabilities.

If the regimental system is a non-starter, then transitioning the National Guard’s ABCTs and SBCTs to IBCTs would certainly provide significant savings to routine training, operations and support costs for the National Guard and reserve component. In either case, substantial force structure changes would force combatant commands to reconsider their existing and future campaign plans and so would first decrease requirements on the Army and then would lessen requirements on the reserve component. Fewer standing or planned requirements would
decrease training, operations and support costs, while preserving existing reserve component readiness, making it more flexible to support domestic emergencies, all the while rebuilding trust with its Soldiers, families and civilian support network.

Conclusion

Reality is staring the Army in the face. The Total Army concept, while not a failure, certainly needs to be modified. In its existing form, it is putting far too much strain on the reserve component and is rapidly churning through its budget. The biggest indicator of the Guard and reserve component crisis is the National Guard facing insolvency. The biggest cause of this crisis is the use of the reserve component beyond the bounds of how an operational reserve should be employed. The result is that the reserve component is strapped for cash, has alienated many civilian employers, and has eroded trust with its servicemembers and their families. The National Guard, still reeling from an incredible two years in which it has faced unprecedented mobilization and employment at home and abroad, is all but unable to continue operations because of the inordinate strain that has been placed on it.

Allocating more money and throwing it at the National Guard and Army Reserve will only provide a temporary and cosmetic solution to the reserve component’s perils. The Department of the Army needs to make significant structural changes to the Total Army, to include adjusting employment models and force structure modifications within the reserve component—and modifying the Total Army concept itself—to continue providing the nation with a capable reserve.

Notes

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