
Defense Report

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The Individual Ready Reserve— A Dwindling Asset

It is a military fact of life that an Army is never up to full strength at the time it really needs to be—at the beginning of a war.

Ever since the first organized armies swept the plains of Persia there have been plans to bolster their strength on the eve of combat by means ranging from forcible conscription to the simple call-up of reserves.

The scenario for mobilizing the United States Army follows this second pattern. The Regular Army would be put on a war footing, it would be bolstered by the call-up of Army Reserve and National Guard units and all units would be fleshed out with personnel from the Individual Ready Reserve. In fact the Army estimates it would need 828,000 individual reinforcements to get it and its reserve components ready for a war that might begin in 1980.

But the Defense Manpower Commission, in its two-year study of military personnel matters, has concluded that the Army's realistic share of the Individual Ready Reserve in 1980 will be a mere 37,000—a shortfall of more than 790,000.

The Individual Ready Reserve is composed of men who have served an initial term of service and still have some time left in their statutory six-year service obligation (Women are not obligated for further service). They are not paid and do not attend monthly drills. The shrinking size of the I.R.R. is due to a variety of reasons, chiefly the lack of the Draft which brought many men into the Army for just two years and then turned them over to the reserves for the balance of their obligated service. Also, the members of the new, volunteer force serve longer (now a minimum of three years) and reenlist more often, thus reducing the length of time they are available for reserve duty.

The Manpower Commission rejected a Defense Department proposal to help solve the IRR shortfall by extending the period of obligated service to eight years. It would have no effect until the mid-80's, they said, and in the meantime it would discourage enlistment in both active and reserve forces.

As a counter proposal the commission recommended that Congress and the Defense Department look at a plan to establish a paid IRR, concentrating on reservists with critical skills, such as those needed immediately in combat units.

While Congress might not be pleased with the idea of driving military personnel costs up even further it cannot argue with the need for the reinforcement capability represented by the Individual Ready Reserve.

The IRR cannot be permitted to shrink to the point of being useless.