
Defense Report

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How Few People Can the Army Have and Still Do Its Job?

The Senate Armed Services Committee has just approved a Fiscal Year 1978 Defense Authorization Bill which would impose a cut of 12,900 in Army military manpower and a slash of 7,200 Army civilian employees. This latest manpower manipulation is puzzling at best.

When the Volunteer Army was conceived there was a move to authorize more civilian employees to do some of the non-military support tasks that had traditionally fallen on soldiers—kitchen police, grass mowing and other things. It was known that volunteer military manpower was going to be expensive and that it should not be wasted on jobs that could be done for less by civilians. Unfortunately this idea was never fully implemented.

With some savings from civilianization and by stripping headquarters and support operations the Army was able to increase its division organization from 13 to 16 within its overall end strength. The 16-division force also got a big boost from the Total Force Concept—the idea of well-prepared reserve forces backing up lean active forces. Some reserve units were even designated to be part of active units, to train with them and to fight with them.

There are still top-notch reserve units, ready to go to war on short notice but the broad picture of reserve readiness fades day-by-day because of declining strength.

The committee recommended that the military cuts be made in the training establishment, apparently succumbing to questionable findings from the General Accounting Office that Army Support/Student ratios were higher than in civilian institutions. The GAO habitually ignores the fact that most military training requires closer supervision because of its "life or death" nature. It also ignores the fact that civilian institutions don't have to include police, fire, and utility services in their ratios as do the self-sustaining military bases.

The committee also says the civilians will not be fired but the cut will be made by attrition. However, once a job is vacant a certain amount of work is not being done, whether the departed incumbent was fired or just quit. The remaining employees cannot pick up all the slack. If the work is really critical to the operation of the base the commander has little choice but to divert that expensive military manpower to fill the gap. Last year the Army used 20,000 military man-years to do civilian-type jobs.

This cut may be the way Senator John Stennis (D-Miss.) chooses to indicate his Armed Services Committee's lack of faith in the future of the volunteer concept. Hamstringing the Army is not the way to do that. Hopefully the final 1978 Authorization Bill will not reflect this shortsighted reasoning.