
Defense Report

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The Reserve Forces—Will They Survive Being Studied?

Would you believe that since 1970 the Department of Defense, the military services and other federal agencies have studied the problems of the reserve components—The Army and Air Force National Guard and the Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps Reserve—more than 100 times?

There is no question that the reserve forces of the United States have problems. The Army Reserve, the Army National Guard and the Marine Corps Reserve have serious manpower shortages and their counterparts in the Air Force are seeing signs that their balloon of recruiting success has sprung a leak. The Department of Defense cannot seem to make up its mind about how big the Navy Reserve should be. All of the components have equipment problems ranging in severity from nagging to near-catastrophic.

Why has it not been possible to arrive at solutions as a result of all those studies? One answer, of course, is that changing Congresses (four since 1971) and changing administrations have not found the proposed solutions compatible with their fiscal or political goals. The response to many of the studies has been, "We don't like that solution. Give us another study and another answer."

As a result there are at this moment four reserve studies underway in the office of the Secretary of Defense—with another one about to start. The Air Force has just completed a study and the Navy is going to restudy its reserve requirement (a parallel study just two years old is apparently not giving the new administration the kind of answers it wants).

Amazingly, the 100 studies performed since 1970 do not include any that have been done outside Washington by, for example, the service War Colleges, each of which has an agency devoted to deep introspection and ferreting out the answers to tricky problems.

Of course ordering a new study is also an excellent delaying tactic. If you are presented with a problem, like the status of the reserve forces, which is loaded with fiscal, strategic and purely political ramifications it is easy to say simply, "Yes, we have a problem. Let's study it." It's hard to stick your neck out with a firm course of action.

Our basic military strategy envisions critical roles for the reserve forces. The active elements of our military strength are designed to rely heavily on reserve support—even immediate combat participation. Somewhere in those 100 studies is the information the Department of Defense and the Administration need to find a way out of this predicament. It is time to study the studies, not to cover the same ground with new ones.