
Defense Report

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Civilian Manpower To Replace Military —How Far Can We Go?

At first blush it would seem that every military commander would be overjoyed if he could look over his troops and know that every one of them was a fighter—each one a direct contributor to the accomplishment of his ultimate mission, the defeat of enemy armed forces.

But no commander worth the name would want to go into battle with nothing but trigger-squeezers. He would know that those fighters would have to be fed and to be cared for when they were wounded. He would have to have communications and supplies and the weaponry would have to be maintained. What the commander really needs is an ideal mixture of fighters, cooks, medics, and technicians. This fundamental issue has never been in dispute but the setting of the ideal mixture certainly has.

Most recently the General Accounting Office, Congress' watchdog on the executive departments, and the prestigious civilian Brookings Institution have published reports alleging gross waste of military manpower in jobs that could be done cheaper by civilians. They make some good points. It is hard to argue with their claim, for example, that military waiters in the dining halls at the Air Force Academy could be reassigned to military duties and their places taken, more cheaply, by civilians. In fact, as one looks around any military base, it is not hard to find a whole galaxy of housekeeping and support jobs that could be done by civilians, leaving military folks free to train and perform more martial duties. Mechanics, telephone linemen, medical technicians, truck drivers—all could be civilians but a total swap would not work for one important reason.

And that reason is simple. When the unit on that post is ordered overseas into combat it must take mechanics, telephone linemen, medical technicians, and truck drivers with it and they must be military people. There has never been a mobilization order written, at least not in the United States, that would permit the unit commander to draft, impress or shanghai a select group of his peacetime civilian employees.

So in peacetime military support specialists work side-by-side with civilians doing the same job. The civilians, with longer tenure on the job, provide continuity and the expertise that will help their military counterparts do their jobs better.

By all means let's have qualified civilians doing as many jobs as possible on military installations but let us never lose sight of the fact that certain of those functions must be deployed with the military units they serve.

Civilianization can be a money saver and a training-time maximizer. It can also be a threat to military capabilities if carried too far.