
Defense Report

AUSA



Substituting Civilians for Military Personnel—We Sometimes Lose Sight of Military Needs

Every so often someone rediscovers the wheel—just as the Brookings Institution has recently discovered that it costs less to hire civilians to perform some military functions. The report of the Brookings discovery leaves the reader with the impression that we could cut large chunks out of the National Defense budget by hiring civilians for whom we would not have to provide food, housing, arms and ammunition. Unfortunately, the report does not deal adequately with the question of the kind of defense capability we would be left with after a wholesale civilian-for-military substitution.

The Institution's report claims to have identified 377,000 ". . . billets now occupied by the military [that] could be considered candidates for civilian substitution." At the very least, if this figure is even approximately correct, it is an accusation of gross mismanagement on the part of the Department of Defense and abdication of the oversight responsibilities of the U.S. Congress.

In an analysis that is almost totally budget-driven, the Brookings report accuses military managers of attempting to save money in operating bases by using military personnel whose salaries do not come out of the base operating funds. No one would realistically claim that this sort of reasoning was never operative but the report generalizes so broadly that the uninitiated reader might well believe it is universal. As Brookings sees it, the mission of military bases is to satisfy the political expediency of getting members of Congress reelected, with little or no concern for providing facilities to support a combat-ready unit of the armed forces.

Each time this civilian/military wheel has been rediscovered the Association of the United States Army has tried to focus the debate on the only part of the issue that really counts—the ability of the military units to do their job. There is no question that civilians can drive the dump trucks of an engineer construction battalion or climb telephone poles to service a communication system but that doesn't really matter. What does matter is whether that construction battalion could do its job if suddenly deployed overseas.

No one argues with the notion that our defense establishment should be as efficient as possible. There are unquestionably some bases scattered around the country that need a hard look at their worth and many others at which the ratio of military personnel and civilian employees needs an objective examination but, in the forefront of the studies and the examinations, the issue of readiness should be paramount. There are no bargains in national defense and wholesale substitution of civilians for military people would be a false economy at best.