
Defense Report

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The Total Army—A Concept in Deep Trouble

The United States Army has shrunk by more than half since the Vietnam War ended. Some of the shrinkage was the natural result of ending our engagement in Southeast Asia but a very significant part of the reduction was generated by the need to save manpower dollars as the expensive volunteer replaced the less-expensive draftee in the ranks. As the size of the Active Army fell away under the budgeteer's knife, however, there was no concomitant reduction in military commitments to support our foreign policy. Also, critics of our military structure claimed the Army had too many people engaged in support activities and not enough in combat units.

Responding to this criticism, the Army leadership expanded the number of combat divisions in the active force from 13 to 16 without any increase in overall personnel strength. The idea of the Total Army was born. High priority reserve units were to fill the gaps in both combat and support the Active Army could not fill. Today about 80 percent of the support units the Army would need to sustain an overseas deployment for more than a very brief period are in the reserve structure and many of these units are undermanned and ill-equipped.

This is not to say that the Total Army is a bad idea. It promised to make the best possible use of the available assets but it was understood from its conception that it required full support to make it work. That support has fallen short. First, the loss of draft-based motivation to serve in the reserves and the shrinking number of people entering the reserve after Active Army service has caused Army Reserve and Army National Guard strength to plummet. Second, the unwillingness of successive administration to spend money on materiel readiness slowed the flow of up-to-date equipment to the reserves and even caused the active force to withdraw some equipment already in reserve units. In many reserve units training has had to take a back seat to recruiting.

In their recent testimony before Congress the Chiefs of the Army Reserve and National Guard described the depth of their manpower problems. The Reserve stands 91,000 shy of the numbers it would need at the outset of a war. The National Guard is 83,160 below its required wartime level. The combined shortfall is 174,160 below the needed mobilization level.

The Total Army can be salvaged but it will take an heroic effort in the form of reserve enlistment and reenlistment incentives, increased hardware procurement and probably pressure from a revitalized Selective Service System before the reserve part of the force can play its proper role. The only other alternative is to make the Active Army totally self-supporting, a shift in philosophy that would force the active force to almost double in size.