
Defense Report

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Calling Veterans and Retirees Back to Duty—A Sign of Desperation

Carter Administration officials appointed to manage the nation's military manpower recently briefed the Senate Armed Services Committee on a proposal to solve the Army's trained manpower shortage for mobilization by involuntarily calling back to duty hundreds of thousands of men who have already served in the armed forces. Included in the group would be men under age 30 who had been drafted or enlisted into the Army, completed their total obligated service, including reserve duty, and career military men who had retired from active duty but were considered young and healthy enough to be called back.

Quite understandably, the briefers were laughed out of the Senate Office Building by senators who could hardly believe what they had heard and by committee staff members who saw a host of pitfalls in the proposal. It was immediately clear that the idea had its genesis in the Administration's stark fear of having to reinstitute selective service as a source of the manpower that would be needed quickly in the event of a mobilization. Rather than now risk an outcry from miniscule anti-draft and anti-military elements by returning the selective service machinery to workable condition the Administration would place those who had already served their country in double jeopardy.

No one argues that, if the nation were about to be defeated in a struggle for survival, anyone able to bear arms should serve, regardless of previous service. This is particularly true for those drawing military retired pay and still carried on the rolls of their services. A recent survey showed that many retirees would be anxious to be called-up in an emergency. But it's a different matter for the non-careerists who have severed all connections with the military. Without an intensive search of Social Security and Internal Revenue Service records these veterans could not even be found and without some sort of machinery, like Selective Service Boards, there would be no way to screen them. Some, after all, would surely have acquired occupational, family or health reasons for being deferred from further service.

The shape of what is needed to provide additional military manpower at the onset of a mobilization already exists in the reserve components but that shape now lacks sufficient muscle in its ranks. Incentives to enlist and reenlist in the reserves, coupled with Selective Service for training and subsequent duty in the Individual Ready Reserve, could provide the muscle if these courses were pressed by the Administration.

Only after all other logical courses are pursued to fruition should any consideration be given to involuntarily recalling veterans. That course is a cop-out from the inescapable responsibility of national leadership.