
Defense Report

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A Rapid Reaction Force—If We Are to Have One We Must Be Prepared to Support It

The recent hostage situation in Iran and the destruction of the U.S. Embassy in Pakistan have substantially revived interest in the advisability of having a rapid reaction force ready at all times. It is not a new idea. The most recent previous inquiry into its feasibility came early in the Carter Administration when the Defense Department was asked to look into the possibility of having a Corps-sized force of Army and Marine divisions ready to step into an upheaval in the Persian Gulf region. It was a good idea then and it still is.

The current exploration by the Administration includes talk about increasing mobility resources to make deployment of the Rapid Reaction Force possible. This is certainly a necessary part of preparing to use such a force but other things need to be explored, also. Since we must assume that the force would be committed to combat, we must assure ourselves that the requisite supplies of ammunition, food, spare vehicles and replacement parts can be on hand when they are needed. We must be sure that casualties can be given proper care and, when necessary, evacuated speedily. We must have a sure source of trained individual replacements.

All these considerations seem like military truisms but, unfortunately, the United States cannot now guarantee that they will fall into place when needed. Stockpiles of ammunition are marginally adequate at best and our production capacity for many types of critical ammunition cannot be expanded very fast. Production lines for tanks and other combat vehicles are geared to a very slow peacetime pace and, because there are only a few sources—sometimes only a single source—of critical subassemblies like tank turrets, the production lines cannot be speeded up overnight. Military medical facilities are struggling to keep abreast of peacetime health care needs and, because there are so few military physicians, probably could not cope with the expanded task.

There is no present source of sizeable numbers of trained individual replacements to sustain the force over an extended period of time. The Individual Ready Reserve is about 400,000 short of the numbers it should have and, lacking a responsive Selective Service System that could get selectees into training camps quickly, the Army would be forced to strip combat units at home to find the replacements—both people and equipment. Obviously that would deplete the Army's ability to respond if the conflagration escalated or if trouble erupted elsewhere.

Certainly, let's have a Rapid Reaction Force. But let's realize as we create the force that we must also give it the wherewithall to do its job without having to strip the rest of our forces.