
Defense Report

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The Rapid Deployment Force — There Are Some Facts We Should Know About It

When the frustrations of the Tehran hostage situation and the alarm over the invasion of Afghanistan caused President Carter to create a new organization called the Rapid Deployment Force many people thought it was a good idea and many more wondered why we did not already have one. The fact is that we have had one for a long time—so long that it has almost been forgotten.

In the rapture over something “new” many people have overlooked the fact that the Army has an airborne division, the 82d, that has one of its brigades ready to go at all times, within 24 hours of being alerted—and the rest of the division can be on its way shortly after that. The Army also has the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), a helicopter-borne force that can be deployed overseas by air, some light infantry brigades and some ranger battalions, all of which could be deployed rapidly. The Marine Corps, of course, keeps combat-ready troops afloat and ready to deploy in at least battalion size at all times. The headquarters of the U.S. Readiness Command has been in operation for many years to plan for and execute a wide variety of missions.

It is obvious that what a Rapid Deployment Force needs most is the flexibility to permit it to cope with varied situations. In some of those situations, the Army's airborne capability would be the best one to use. In others the Marine Corps' ability to put heavily-armed forces ashore from the seas would be the most appropriate. A rescue mission or a small military contingency might best be handled by an Army ranger battalion. On the face of things, there seems to be enough flexibility to handle almost any situation.

But each of these capabilities presents its own set of problems. A ranger battalion can only be used in a short-term situation, where it can do its job quickly and be extracted. The airborne division can be dropped anywhere in the world but it, too, has limited ability to sustain itself and must be rather quickly relieved or reinforced if under heavy enemy pressure. The Marine divisions are organized and trained to make only a limited advance inland and rely totally on the Navy and the Army for most of their logistic support. In every case the ability to deploy the force depends entirely on the availability of the right amounts of the right kind of transportation. The Navy has only enough amphibious sealift to move one Marine division and the sealift would have to be collected from all over the world. The air movement of the entire 82d airborne division and its support would make very heavy demands on the Air Force.

The simple act of designating a Rapid Deployment Force doesn't change anything. The forces were already there. What we really need is attention to the immediate procurement of the kinds of ships and planes we need to get the force where it is needed and to support it after it arrives. Ongoing actions along this line are too few and too slow.