
Defense Report

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The Army Criticizes Its Own Readiness — No One Should Have Been Surprised About the Results

A classified Army readiness report surfaced in the press recently and triggered a chorus of alarms and a mass waving of accusing fingers. In essence, the report said that several of the Army's divisions in the United States are not ready to fight. The prime reason given for the divisions' inability to respond to a call to combat was the shortage of manpower, but there were other reasons as well.

To the casual newspaper reader the reports were justifiably disturbing. It is not very agreeable, after all, to hear that billions of dollars being spent on the Army each year have not entirely accomplished the goal of having 16 combat-ready divisions. But for the knowledgeable members of the press and to the congressmen and senators who regularly deal with military affairs there should have been no surprises. The Army's military leaders had not been pulling their punches when asked if they had any problems. The Chief of Staff, Gen. Edward C. Meyer, had gone so far as telling Congress he leads ". . . a hollow Army." The Association of the U.S. Army, a nonprofit educational organization of active, reserve and retired military people, had been pointing out a wide spectrum of readiness problems for several years.

Since the war in Vietnam ended, the Army's personnel strength had been shrinking steadily but its worldwide responsibilities have not. In order to squeeze more combat power out of that constricted manpower base the Army shifted much of its support capability to the Army Reserve and Army National Guard and then expanded its active combat divisions from 13 to 16. Today the Army is authorized less than half the people it had at the height of the Vietnam war. It is a smaller Army than at any time since before the Korean War started in 1950. Divisions overseas have been kept slightly overstrength to guarantee their readiness but those at home have suffered as a result.

A visitor to most of the Army's home posts would be likely to see companies training without one of their platoons, platoons short a squad and armored battalions in the field with barely half their tanks for want of crews. The Selected Reserve and National Guard units that should be ready immediately to go to war alongside the regulars are also severely understrength. Further, because the Army's civilian work force has been cut by 55,000 over the past few years an average training day will see about 15,000 soldiers diverted from military jobs to perform tasks more appropriately done by civilians.

This is a grim picture and we have not yet touched on problems with equipment availability, the status of ammunition supplies and the poor expectation of rapid industrial mobilization for war. We must once again point out, though, that none of these factors, either human or material, should come as a surprise to those who claim knowledge and interest in military affairs. The Army's classified report simply "told it like it is."