
Defense Report

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Civilian Employees Make the Army Run — and There Are Not Enough of Them

The uniformed members of the Army may march off to the sound of guns, but if it were not for the civilian members of the Army team the combat units would not get very far or have much to fight with when they arrived on the battlefield. The civilian employees of the Army undergird every activity from operating our military bases to research, development and procurement and ranging through maintenance, transportation, training and communications. Without them, the uniformed Army would probably have to be almost twice as big and would be far less efficient.

In 1968, at the height of the war in Vietnam, the Army employed 566,417 civilian support personnel. It was natural for that number to drop after the fighting stopped and by 1970 the civilian work force had dropped by more than 120,000 to 444,000. In the following years, the Army's military structure was increased from 13 to 16 combat divisions (while still dropping in the number of uniformed members), and a drive was initiated to civilianize many heretofore military jobs so the soldiers could concentrate on training and military readiness. It seemed like a good idea at the time and probably would have worked well if the civilian work force had stayed at a constant level. But it did not.

In the past five years alone the Army civilian work force has dropped another 57,000 from its ranks with, of course, no accompanying diminution of support requirements. Now, as each duty day dawns, about 15,000 soldiers must be diverted from their military duties, including training, to perform vital tasks that should be carried out by civilians. In terms of numbers those 15,000 soldiers represent the equivalent of a full combat division lost to the Army every duty day.

To compound the problem, President Carter has imposed a freeze on hiring new civilian employees to replace those lost by retirement and other forms of attrition and President-elect Reagan has said he will continue the freeze. Each month the freeze has been in effect has cost the Army between 800 and 1,000 employees who cannot be easily replaced. And, as if the status of the work force were not sufficiently bleak, the Army is severely hindered in its efforts to hire badly needed scientists and engineers (even without the hiring freeze) because Civil Service regulations will not permit them to be hired at attractive pay levels. It is these scientists and engineers, by the way, who provide the continuity of management for the Army's complex research, development and procurement programs.

The condition of the civilian work force has been described as the greatest problem in manning the Army today and there is no encouragement from indications by the Department of Defense that it intends to drop the size of the civilian force by another 6,000 over the next two years. Tomorrow or two years from now there will be no fewer jobs to be done and we don't expect the uniformed Army to be any bigger. It appears that only the onset of a true emergency can convince the Defense Department and the White House Office of Management and Budget that we are incapable of functioning under stress. We may have mortgaged our future in the interest of saving dollars for civilian salaries.