
Defense Report

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Let There Be No Mistake — Civilians Make the Army Go

Few people realize how dependent our armed services are upon the civilian men and women who keep the records, maintain the facilities, move the supplies and perform the most intricate maintenance on our increasingly sophisticated arsenal of weapons. If all those civilians were to disappear one day we would have to increase the number of people in uniform by at least 50 percent and would still not achieve the kind of efficiency contributed by a career civilian work force.

Over the past five years the Army has watched its civilian force shrink by about 65,000 as budget-cutters in the Department of Defense and at the White House have opted to take the instant cost savings provided by a personnel cut rather than pay the full price of military readiness. More than a year ago President Carter imposed a hiring limitation which permitted hiring just one new employee to replace two who were lost. That action alone cost the Army more than 1,000 employees a month. Now President Reagan, in his laudable desire to balance the federal budget, has imposed a total hiring freeze that the Army estimates will shrink its civilian work force by 5,000 each month as employees retire or seek other jobs.

There are many evidences of this civilian shortage throughout the Army. One of the most dramatic of these is found in the ability of the Materiel Development and Readiness Command to do its job of developing, procuring, warehousing, shipping and maintaining the Army's equipment. It no longer has enough contracting officers to deal with suppliers. Supplies no longer move through its warehouses at optimum speed and the backlog of major pieces of equipment—tanks, artillery pieces and aircraft, for example—waiting to be rebuilt is steadily increasing.

At Army bases all across the United States the shortage of civilian employees has forced commanders to divert soldiers from military training to perform inescapable housekeeping functions. Army-wide, those diversions amount to something between 25,000 and 28,000 soldiers each day or a cumulative total of about 16,000 man-years. This latter figure, of course, amounts to the total effort of a complete combat division for an entire year. The falseness of this economy is all the more obvious when one recognizes that it is far more expensive to use soldiers in support tasks than it is to employ civilians. We not only pay a price in weakened military training but also wind up paying more for the use of the soldiers because they must be fed and housed as well as paid.

The Army has made a strong plea to the new Secretary of Defense for permission to increase its civilian strength by 10,000 per year for the next three years. The secretary has seemed receptive but there is still a big hurdle ahead in the form of the White House budgeteers. Hopefully, they will see the sound logic in this departure from the federal hiring freeze.