
Defense Report

AUSA



Even with Increased Defense Spending the Army Won't "Get Well" Overnight

Our newly elected Administration has just announced changes to the 1981 and 1982 defense budgets that reflect substantial increases in spending for national security. This is a comforting move that should have been made several years ago, but in order to gauge just how much comfort we can expect we must first look closely at our starting position. In many cases, the elevated level of defense spending will do little more than help us achieve a posture that most of the American public assumed to exist all along.

The public assumes, for example, that the Army's fighting divisions and separate regiments and battalions have all the main battle tanks they need, even though some of those tanks might be obsolescent. Actually, the Army now has just 71 percent of the tanks it needs to go to war. The public would logically assume that the Army has all the armored personnel carriers and fighting vehicles it needs to cope with a highly mechanized enemy force. In reality, the Army has just 64 percent of its requirement and the great bulk of the armored personnel carriers are of a design that is well over 20 years old. The U.S. Army was the innovator of airmobility and aerial firepower through the use of helicopters, so the public should be safe in the assumption that their Army is adequately supplied with rotary-wing aircraft. They are wrong, once again. The Army has just 53 percent of the kind of sophisticated armed helicopters it needs.

To be absolutely accurate, even these figures don't represent what the Army has on hand now. Rather, they reflect where the Army expects to be after all production of new equipment authorized in the fiscal year 1981 defense budget is complete. At a minimum, this will be two years off. Our industrial capacity to build the airframes, engines, avionics and other essential parts for the FY '81 increment of new helicopters is so limited that it is impossible to expect delivery of a helicopter order in the same year it was authorized. The same conditions apply to many of the subassemblies that make the tanks and carriers function. At one point during 1980, the Chrysler Corp. tank plant had dozens of incomplete Abrams M-1 tanks—the Army's new main battle tank—awaiting engines.

As the Army looks into the future it does not expect to be able to build up to full equipment strength very fast. If the higher level of procurement represented in President Reagan's revised 1982 defense budget is approved by Congress, the Army expects to have 72 percent of its tanks, 69 percent of its fighting vehicles and 60 percent of its attack helicopters by the time the 1982 "buy" is complete—probably in calendar year 1984. The procurement projected by fiscal year 1986 will probably stretch out for two or three years past that point and the Army's inventory of first-line tanks, fighting vehicles and attack helicopters is then expected to reach 89 percent, 74 percent and 71 percent, respectively.

The Army has fallen too far behind over the course of the past ten years to permit it to recover very fast. But at least we have started.