
Defense Report

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The Debate over Control of the Rapid Deployment Force—It's a Manufactured Controversy

In 1979 there were a number of events in distant corners of the world that caused the United States to look more closely at its ability to respond in timely fashion to threats to its own interests or those of its allies. We found ourselves wanting in many ways, like air and sea transport and logistic support, and the Department of Defense recommended that President Carter designate a force to be ready for rapid deployment.

Thus, the Rapid Deployment Force was born and the President designated a Marine Corps general to be its commander. The ink was hardly dry on the general's orders before there were reports of a controversy between the Army and Marine Corps over who would have the larger role to play and, more specifically, over having a Marine in command of a force that, in all likelihood, would wind up with more soldiers than Marines. One of the early sources of the controversy was the tendency on the part of some members of the press to ignore the instantaneous reaction abilities of a number of Army units, the 82nd Airborne Division and the separate ranger battalions in particular, and credit the Marine Corps with being the only force that could be quickly injected into a trouble spot. Fortunately, as time went by a greater appreciation of Army capabilities found its way into reporting on the RDF.

But now the controversy has erupted anew, this time based on a press report that the Army was fighting Marine control of the RDF because it—and the Marines—saw participation in the force as critical to its future well-being. The most unsettling thing about the latest report is that it followed an earlier one in the same national newspaper (by a different reporter) in which Gen. Edward C. Meyer, the Chief of Staff of the Army, made it very clear that there are plenty of missions to justify keeping both the Army and the Marine Corps at full strength and in good health. Said the Army's uniformed leader, "When I look around the world at the areas where we are going to need land forces, there is so much to do that I just don't see any need for conflict between the Army and the Marine Corps." Gen. Meyer also pointed out the realities of the way the defense establishment is organized today. "There's no one service that can take any one mission completely," he said. "Wherever the Marines go, we are charged with providing them with sustaining capability."

Both the Army and the Marine Corps have enough problems without becoming involved in a manufactured controversy. That is not to say there are no individual soldiers and Marines, junior and senior, who would rather see their service take a preeminent position over the other. But, as far as the Army's highest policymakers are concerned, the ground combat pie is plenty big for both services to get more than either of them can handle.