
Defense Report

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As We Modernize the Army, We May Find It Is the Wrong Size

After more than 20 years of stagnation in its inventory of weapons and equipment the Army is finally embarked on a modernization program that will, when completed, make it at least qualitatively equal to any other army. It will have new tanks, new personnel carriers, new helicopters, air-defense weapons and communications gear and a host of other items needed to bring our prime ground combat force up to a state-of-the-art level of readiness. Quite rightly, the Army's planners are most concerned at the moment with building support for the funding needed to bring about this hardware millennium.

But they are also concerned with the predictable side effects of this influx of new equipment on such things as manning, maintenance and training. Where a new item of equipment is replacing an old one the impact may not be as great. The new XM1 tank, for instance, has the same size crew as the M60 tank it replaces. But the Army is about to field several new air-defense weapon systems that have no current parallel so the crews to man them will have to be found from among people now assigned to other tasks, unless the Army is authorized to recruit additional people. Initially, the Army will probably have to absorb the larger requirement within its present strength.

But, as difficult as it may be for the Army to man some of these new systems, it will be even harder to find the personnel assets to train the crews and maintain the equipment, particularly when the maintenance must be performed at the sophisticated depot level. The Army's loss of 55,000 civilian employees over the past few years has, among other things, resulted in a growing backlog of depot maintenance which is performed almost exclusively by civilians. The new, more complex equipment will heighten that problem unless the Army is given some relief from hiring freezes and lowered civilian manpower ceilings.

Of course, the more sophisticated an item of military equipment becomes the more intense must be the training of the people who are going to operate it. The XM1 tank is, once again, a good example. It has a turbine engine and an armament system that permits it to shoot while on the move, either day or night. It will take longer to train both the crew that will operate it and the soldier/mechanics who will keep it going on the battlefield. The training and crew rotation for some new systems, especially air-defense weapons, will be complicated by the fact that there will be more units stationed overseas than at home, creating the likelihood of very rapid turn-arounds between overseas assignments—a reality not conducive to good morale.

It is already clear that a modernized Army does not have enough civilian employees to keep itself going. It is growing more apparent that it will run out of soldiers, too. A more modern Army, it seems, may also have to be a bigger one.