
Defense Report

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The Army National Guard and Reserve — They Are More important Than Ever Before

To many Americans the Army National Guard and Reserve are just a bunch of people in green uniforms who collect at the local armory or Reserve center on weekends or mess up Sunday traffic by blending truck convoys into the pattern of pleasure-seeking civilian vehicles. These same Americans probably wonder why there has been so much effort over the past few years to promote service in the Guard and Reserve and to gain employer support for the people who choose to serve their country as part-time soldiers.

The reason for the emphasis is very simple. The U.S. Army National Guard and Army Reserve now play a much more important role in the organization for defense of the nation than they have at any other time in our history—except perhaps in the earliest days when “the militia” was almost the sole line of defense. This enhanced importance has been brought about by the creation of what is called the “Total Army,” in which the Guardsmen, Reservists and regulars would march off to war together, dependent on each other.

To illustrate this interdependence: more than half (58 percent) of the Army’s deployable forces are in the Guard and Reserve. This includes 51 percent of the Army’s infantry and armor battalions, 58 percent of its field artillery battalions, 65 percent of its combat engineer battalions and 65 percent of its tactical support troops. One third of the Army’s 24 combat divisions are comprised of Guardsmen, and several separate Guard and Reserve combat brigades “round out” the strength of active-Army divisions and would deploy with them.

In theory, the Total Army concept is an excellent one. In practice, it leaves something to be desired, not because of any lack of willingness or skill on the part of the Guard and Reserve, but because a series of administrations and acquiescent Congresses have declined to pay the bills to outfit them adequately. For example, the Army National Guard has just ten percent of the chemical defense equipment it requires, many of its tactical radios will not net with those of active units, and it must do with ¼-ton “jeeps” in place of armored carriers for TOW missiles.

This kind of parsimony is defeating the promise of the Total Army.