
Defense Report

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Cutting Military Officer Strength— Sure Way to Hurt National Defense

Expressing concern over what it calls a “disproportionate growth” in the military officer corps in the last five years, Congress has ordered a six percent reduction in active officer ranks over the next three years. From both a morale and a combat readiness standpoint, the congressionally mandated officer reductions are potentially the most damaging in the history of our armed forces. It is the number one concern among captains and majors in today’s Army.

Congress included in the Defense Authorization Act for fiscal 1987, a requirement that the size of the commissioned officer corps in all services be reduced by one percent this year and by two percent and three percent in 1988 and 1989, respectively. The manner in which the Defense Department has apportioned the cuts makes the Army’s share 1,575 officers this year and a total of 6,975 officers over the three years. No one seems to have considered the impact these cuts could have on Army combat readiness.

The tactical doctrine the Army has devised to fight and win on the modern battlefield places a premium on independent actions by small units; bold, decisive maneuvers by well-trained forces to defeat a larger enemy force; and confident, competent leaders at all levels.

Over the past few years, the Army has significantly reorganized its forces to provide balance, flexibility and increased firepower. The mechanized infantry squad has been reduced from 11 men to nine; the tank platoon, from five tanks to four; howitzer crews, from six men to five. Light forces have been organized to provide rapid response to terrorist and low intensity conflict threats. These significant reorganizations account for the majority of the recent increase in the officer-to-enlisted force ratios Congress is concerned about.

The Army was the first to recognize that a high leader-to-led ratio increases flexibility, and it has continued to increase that ratio to improve the force.

Decreasing the number of soldiers in a tank crew or other forward deployed system, without suffering a requisite decrease in firepower, is a worthy goal. Eliminating the officer leadership from that smaller force to meet a congressionally mandated officer-enlisted ratio is not.