
Defense Report

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Cutting the Civilian Workforce — Can the Army Keep on Rolling?

When the Reagan Administration first came to power, a lot of military officials complained of serious shortages in the civilian workforce. They were talking about non-uniformed employees who undergird every activity from operating our Army bases to research, development and procurement and ranging through the functions of maintenance, transportation, training, medical and communications. At that time, the Army estimated that enough soldiers to man a full combat division were working in civilian slots, many of them critical to mobilization. These borrowed soldiers were not available to deploy with their units in wartime, thus causing serious reductions in tactical unit readiness.

In response to strong pleas from the Army leadership, Congress, in 1984, wisely removed its arbitrary civilian strength ceiling. This allowed the Army to manage its workforce more effectively by returning soldiers to the fighting units and by assigning to civilians the functions of keeping the records, maintaining the facilities, moving the supplies and performing the most intricate maintenance on our increasingly sophisticated arsenal of weapons. Coupled with other adjustments to the Army support structure, this allowed the Army to grow from 16 to 18 combat divisions without increasing the number of soldiers.

Today, there is every indication that reductions in the workforce, mandated by reduced Army funding for fiscal 1988 and 1989, will again force reliance on borrowed military manpower to fill critical civilian vacancies. In all, budget cuts dictate that the Army will lose more than 12,200 civilian employees by the end of next year. Equipment and supplies will no longer move through warehouses at optimum speed and the backlog of major pieces of equipment waiting to be repaired or rebuilt will steadily increase.

Most important, when Army commanders around the world are forced to divert soldiers from military training to perform housekeeping functions, there is a direct, negative impact on the readiness of the affected units. Congress must seriously consider whether the increased risks to our national security interests are worth the savings in civilian salaries.