
Defense Report

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The Army Reserve and National Guard—How Much More Can They Carry?

One of the ways our national leadership compensated for major cutbacks in the size of our active military forces at the end of the Vietnam war was to put more reliance on our reserve forces and to require them to play an even larger role in fulfilling our national obligations. In today's Army, the Reserve and the National Guard comprise more than 50 percent of our combat forces and more than 70 percent of the support forces. We have placed such a heavy reliance on our reserve forces that the Army is now at the point where it cannot go to war without the immediate involvement of the Reserve Components.

In theory, the "Total Army" concept is an excellent one. One of its major drawbacks, however, is the fact that whenever there is consideration of additional reductions in Active Army strength, Administration and Congressional leaders invariably try to heap additional missions and responsibilities onto the reserves. There must come a time when we have gone as far as is prudent in this arena.

For example, the Defense Department budget for 1989, calls for a reduction of some 9,000 active duty soldiers. That proposal had no sooner cleared the White House when some Pentagon planners were reported to be considering replacing the active troops with National Guard and Reserve units. The real hooker in that sort of thinking lies in the fact that the same budget eliminates some 26,100 people who were to be added to reserve units for the accomplishment of missions already assigned.

No one denies that it costs less to pay, feed and house a reservist, but the savings go no further. To perform their wartime missions, reservists still must receive the same training, equipment and support as their active-duty counterparts. Moreover, the reserves face the same manpower constraints as does the active force, that of the dwindling pool from which to recruit the bright young people need to keep the Army rolling.

Attempting to solve the current budgetary dilemma by transferring too many additional early missions to the Army Reserve and the National Guard will yield dangerously illusory benefits at the risk of imperiling our deployed forces and the nation's strategic interests.