
Defense Report

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The Guard and Reserves—How Deep To Cut?

The announcement by Defense Secretary Dick Cheney that reduction in America's military forces would mean cutting back some 830 reserve and national guard units created a big furor all around the country. Nearly 140,000 members of all services would be affected by Cheney's proposed cut if it is approved by Congress.

Mr. Cheney and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Colin Powell explained the rationale for making these cuts at this time. They told a Pentagon press conference: "Eighty percent of the Reserve and National Guard units that are being taken out were part of that force that was intended to go to Europe and support the active force. Those active units are out. Now we've identified the reserve components that support them, and we're recommending they come out as well."

Criticism of this major reduction in the reserve forces was quick to come—both from state capitols and from Capitol Hill. With the cuts affecting reserves in all 50 states, many in Congress were sensitive to the negative economic impact in their home districts. Cheney and Powell argued the cuts in reserves were needed to balance reductions that were well underway in the active armed forces.

Although the announced reductions are planned over the next two years and are widely spread across the nation, there is no doubt that some small communities will be hit especially hard. The loss of part-time salaries and the closing of many local armories will hit more than a few depressed areas.

There are other considerations too, that contribute to the intensity of the debate. One of these is the point raised by several governors that big cuts in the national guard will impair their ability to employ these forces in disaster relief or riot control operations. It was also charged that the administration was seeking political advantage from the cuts—a charge strongly disavowed by the defense secretary at the time of the announcement.

Whichever way the decision goes, it won't be easy. The big problem for members of Congress, who must vote on the matter, is that reducing defense spending means cutting people and things which will translate to an economic impact back home. Unfortunately, they can't have it both ways.