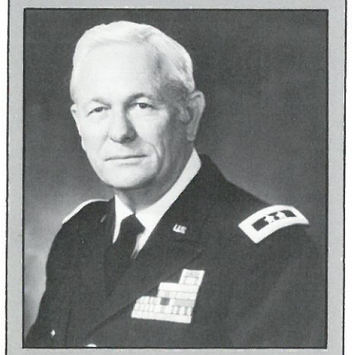

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Where does the equipment go?

OBVIOUSLY convinced after weeks of hearings that a Department of Defense plan to abolish 15 Air National Guard units was unsound, Congress stopped the move in its tracks by mandating retention of the units.

Department of Air Force already is earmarking new missions and equipment for the units in question, to convert them to types currently required.

Congress rarely projects itself so directly into force structure planning. By doing so in this case, it was sending a message, loud and clear, to defense leaders—that it fully supports the Total Force doctrine, under which low-cost Guard and reserve forces are expected to take on a broader range of defense responsibilities in place of higher-cost active forces—that it will not acquiesce in a return to the past, when Guard and reserve forces were mere afterthoughts in the defense planning process.

Whether defense officials got the message is yet to be seen, but there are strong indications they didn't. A companion plan to slash several hundred units and 48,000 spaces out of the Army Guard and Reserve is about ready for unveiling, and there are clear signs that comparable additional reductions are being readied for later years.

The Army and Air Force have made their apprehensions known about further force reductions. It's from Department of Defense that the pressure for more cutbacks is coming.

It's wasteful to retain a unit, goes the defense argument, unless it can maintain a capability for rapid mobilization (days, not weeks) and overseas deployment (weeks, not months). That means high manning levels, an advanced state of training, detailed mobilization plans, pre-mobilization administrative and logistics preparation, accelerated movement to mobilization stations and thence overseas, *full stocks of combat-serviceable equipment, and ample quantities of supplies and spare parts to permit 30 days of combat operations without resupply.*

The defense view, as I comprehend it after a round of discussions with Pentagon officials, is that manpower and training are problems that we are well on the way to overcoming. It's equipment—or the lack thereof—that will figure most heavily in decisions on future Guard/reserve reductions.

The logic of tailoring military forces to equipment availability rather than to carefully calculated military requirements is highly questionable, in my view. But assuming that actual requirements have been estimated, and injected into the force structure equation, why can't sufficient equipment be provided to satisfy urgent requirements? And is the Department of Defense sincerely committed to the Total Force philosophy, or is it still looking at the Guard and reserve as of lesser importance, whose needs are to be satisfied only after all active units and all of our allies are equipped?

A highly-placed Army official recently referred, in my presence, to the frustration he had experienced, trying to determine what happens to all of the equipment that pours into the pipeline, earmarked for the reserve components, yet never emerges from the other end. The explanation, of course, is that it is siphoned-off, en route, to improve the equipment posture of the active forces or to meet the urgent needs of allied nations.

The alternative solutions are obvious: fund and produce more equipment, or make a more equitable distribution of what is available, to the Guard and reserve as well as the active forces and allied armies.

Defense officials appear to doubt that Congress will agree to appropriate additional funds for equipment, spare parts, supplies and organizational impedimenta on top of current funding requests. In their view, Congress would compensate for increases in equipment purchases for the Guard and reserves simply by making reductions elsewhere in the defense budget.

Perhaps their assessment of Congressional attitudes is correct. But I have a hunch that when defense finally is compelled to spell out the details of its force reduction plans, members of Congress will start asking some tough, searching questions. And before they're through, defense may finally get the message that was conveyed so clearly during this year's Air Guard dispute. ◈

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Guardsmen splash ashore from a Navy landing craft during an amphibious assault on California beaches. Realism and practical application of theory turned readiness training into an adventure with a kick.
—(Photo by MSgt William Wilson)

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