The Debate Goes On

THERE is cause for considerable concern in the Army and Air National Guard in two developments which, though seemingly unrelated, have a great potential as grounds for a great deal of future trouble for the Guard.

One is the Presidential decision, made some 19 months ago, to expand the Active Forces and commit sizeable combat forces to Southeast Asia without mobilizing National Guard or Reserve units for the purpose. The other, not a specific event so much as the gradual evolvement of a working theory, is a growing Pentagon attitude that the Guard’s value as a military force is related more to what it contributes today, by performing “live” defense missions, than to its long-range importance as a Reserve Force in the classic sense.

Though the decision against a buildup was based on valid reasons, and those reasons were carefully spelled out, it represented a departure from normal procedures for augmenting the Army and Air Force. As a change from traditional policies, it never has been fully understood by many members of Congress, by the Press, or by broad segments of the general public, despite strenuous explanatory efforts. Even more disturbing from a more immediate point of view, it caused planners and decision-makers in high military councils to start asking: “If we can’t count on the Reserve Forces being available for use in an emergency like Viet Nam, then just when can we count on them?”

Contingency planning, to be valid and useful, must be based on reasonable assurance that the forces assigned will be available. In the eyes of Army and Air Force planners, some portion of that assurance was lost when the buildup they had recommended was overruled on grounds that were at least partly non-military.

As a result, the Army in particular found it necessary to organize new combat support units, from the ground up and from scarce resources, when well-trained units of the desired types were standing by in the Reserve Components. Thus, the possibility is posed that responsibility for maintaining many of the so-called “round out” units may be shifted to the Active Army permanently, thus depriving the Reserve Components of an important mission area.

A similar threat is raised by the tendency to assign undue importance to the cost savings in the performance of “live” missions by many units of both the Army and Air Guard. Such programs as the overseas airlift, Air Guard runway alert, ARNG NIKE-HERCULES operation, and radar watch are important, and Guardsmen can be justifiably proud that they can relieve the Active Forces of many such tasks. But these are only by-products of our most important mission: that of maintaining a high level of readiness in a sizeable combat force against the day when the Nation may face a major threat. Thus, the danger arises that still another kind of mission may be, if not denied to us, at least narrowed considerably.

The outcome of this welter of misunderstanding and debate cannot be predicted, of course, or even gauged at. Our kind of logic seems to rule out cutbacks in any branch or component of the Armed Forces at a time when one conflict is being waged, and other perils threaten. The same reasoning also seems to suggest that continued instability and uncertainty in the Reserve Components is both dangerous and costly.

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