The proposal to create an assistant secretary of Defense exclusively for National Guard and Reserve affairs is not a new one, but it is an idea whose time may have come. Congress has displayed an increasing interest in the subject this year, and obviously its support is essential.

What difference, you may ask, would it make having an assistant secretary of Defense for reserve affairs rather than a deputy assistant secretary? The answer is "quite a bit," but the subject is sufficiently bureaucratic to merit a full explanation.

As any middle-level manager knows, how effective he is in influencing his organization's decisions depends in large part not only on how well he does his job himself, but on his access to the reaches of authority where decisions are made. It is no different with the civilian official who supervises the reserve components at the Department of Defense (DoD) level.

It is the problem of access and quality of time that the upgrading of the senior civilian position on reserve affairs components seeks to solve. Currently, Guard and Reserve matters are under the general purview of the assistant secretary of Defense for manpower, reserve affairs and logistics. Assistant secretaries in both the secretary and deputy secretary of Defense.

Most undersecretaries have deputy assistant secretaries reporting to them, as is the case for the assistant secretary of Defense for manpower, reserve affairs and logistics, who is the Reagan Administration's Lawrence J. Korb. The deputy assistant secretary for reserve affairs is Dr. Edward J. Phiblin, an Air Force Reserve colonel who was a San Diego lawyer in civilian life and whose expertise in Guard and Reserve matters is generally acknowledged as top-notch at the Pentagon. But, regardless of his expertise, he is at this point at least one level removed from the decision maker.

The difference between an assistant secretary and a deputy assistant secretary is more than just what could be perceived as one level of management, however, and that brings us to the quality of time available for Guard and Reserve matters at the secretary of Defense level. The quality of time suffers not because of any lack of interest on the part of the assistant secretary for manpower and reserve affairs and logistics, but rather because his agenda is simply too broad. Consider Dr. Korb's areas of responsibility: the manpower issues of recruiting, retention and all other personnel functions in all the services; logistics to see to all the services needs to include all procurement (except for research and engineering managed by another undersecretary of Defense) in terms of manpower, equipment and transportation.

It should be obvious to even the most casual observer that after Korb finishes making himself an expert on all manpower and procurement issues, all bonus, military pay and allowances, every weapons system and every piece of equipment in all four services, there just isn't enough time in the day to become an expert on the Army and Air Guard, to name only two of the seven reserve components.

That is the sum and substance of why there must be an assistant secretary of Defense responsible for reserve affairs. The reserve components need an individual with the authority to serve as an advocate for the Defense Resources Board (DRB), which makes the decisions that execute the secretary of Defense policy. Because the assistant secretary for reserve affairs would be a full-time expert in Guard and Reserve affairs, the quality of time he would bring to the DRB and the quality of time directly with Weinberger would be much higher.

As mentioned at the beginning, the idea of an assistant secretary of Defense for reserve affairs exclusively for reserve affairs is hardly a new one. In fact when the current DoD structure was created in 1969, the House of Representatives voted to create such a position. The joint conference committee specified a deputy assistant secretary for reserve affairs.

Two key elements in that desire to make it clear the Senate understood the requirements for a reserve component spokesperson and wished to allow some latitude for adjustment.

First, the committee report language published in the Congress of Reserve Affairs and Logistics November 30, 1967, stated: "... he (the deputy assistant secretary) will be looked to as the responsible spokesman for reserve matters at the Department of Defense level. This means that we expect him to see to it that the needs of the reserve forces are a full team of our national defense in terms of manpower, equipment and other essentials."

Second, the Senate said that if downgrading the position to the deputy level didn't work, it would review its inclination to reassert again the assistant secretary position. It appears some key members of Congress agree that the reserve components need their own assistant secretary of Defense. Although creation of this position has enjoyed this Senate support in the past, these members have made it a higher priority this year because of our changed perception of its importance.

That perception for the first time got a full airing at a congressional hearing a few months ago when Guard and Reserve leaders testified before the House Armed Services subcommittee on military personnel and compensation. Two prominent congressmen who support this proposal are Congressman Bill Chappell (D-Florida), a long-time supporter and the second ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Appropriations subcommittee, and Congressman Frank McClory (D-Indiana), an Armed Services member.

Considering the interest in Congress and this quality of apparent support for the position it is possible that Congress has a better chance of either being enacted as a bill or being included in some other legislation on a related subject. It is an idea whose time has come.