Need Less Talk, More Incentives

If the National Guard and Reserves are to maintain the combat capability that Administration officials and defense leaders proclaim as necessary, then it's time (long past time, in our view) for the Department of Defense, the White House Office of Management and Budget, and the Congress to start treating our manning problems with the urgency they deserve on a number of occasions that over the years have come and gone and we still are waiting, not so patiently anymore.

Here's the way the Defense Manpower Command described the situation in its April, 1976, report: "Funds, staffings, emphasis and priorities have necessarily been focused upon the active forces and its maintenance of the active force level with quality increases. There will be no corollary funding for reserve programs for the National Guard and Reserve... A full commitment to the Total Force policy will require additional funds, new policies and priorities, a high-level attention.

Guardians and reservists benefited from the substantial pay increases granted all military personnel. They also were authorized full-time coverage under Servicemen's Group Life Insurance, and a couple of small concessions were made on PX shopping. No other significant new membership incentives were authorized for Guard and Reserves.

In the same period, it needs pointing out that something over two dozen incentives were available to the Active forces that were not authorized for the Guard and Reserve.

In the past, when Guard/Reserve strength temporarily sagged, it was standard practice in both the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill to restore funding by taking away resources that would make it possible to recover this lost manpower. Today, such a practice is unthinkable, if only because of the nation's national security needs.

1. The nation's war plans today are predicated on the ability of the Guard and Reserves to mobilize and deploy rapidly, and fight effectively. That's the basis on which the Active forces were severely reduced several years ago. That's what Total Force is all about.

2. High manning is a critical function of readiness. Recent manpower losses pose a direct and serious threat to Guard/Reserve combat readiness.

3. Even if it were possible to enlist an individual to fill every existing opening in the Guard/Reserve tomorrow, it might be a year or longer (with today's shrunken training bases), before those enlistees could all be trained and integrated into their units.

4. New membership incentives are essential if Guard/Reserve manpower levels are to be restored. A variety of incentives have been "under study" in the Department of Defense (or under "evaluation" in OMB) for four or five years. Now--better late than never--there is talk of enrollment, enlistment-re-enlistment bonuses, survivor benefits, reduced age for retired pay, enhanced medical/health benefits, lifting the 60-point retirement ceiling and more.

Now, the time to bring an incentive package out into the light of day and give it an honest consideration is now. The time is to put the Guard and Reserves back into the Total Force, back into a competitive recruiting stance vis-a-vis the competition.

Now is the time, at long last, to dispense with those more verbose studies and windy discussions, and take some positive forward steps.