MUCH dust has been raised around the country by the congressional report that alleges military readiness has slipped, rather than improved, in the last four years. This conclusion has been "viewed with alarm" in some quarters, prompting defense-spending critics to question the Pentagon's spending priorities.

A close reading of this three-volume report reveals several things. The first is that so much has been deleted for security reasons that drawing very many conclusions at all about the state of readiness from the unclassified version is questionable. Some of the sweeping criticisms of readiness written by staff members of the defense subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee remain in the text, but the facts and figures that presumably back them up are deleted.

A second conclusion, pointed out by Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger in his critique of the study, is that the statistics were assembled mostly in 1982, and to some extent in 1983, but the report wasn't made public for some reason until this summer. That makes much of the substantiating information three or four years old. We in the National Guard can sympathize with Department of Defense (DoD) officials, having suffered on share of slings and arrows about readiness and mobilization over the years based on outdated information.

However, the basic conclusion we form after reading this report is that DoD has imposed a heavy dose of criticism for doing with its money just what we'd recommend it ask for: procure hardware and leave the "softer" supply items until another time.

In 1981, the National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS) decided to emphasize as its first priority the procurement of major end-items of equipment. We concluded that unless this equipment was on hand in units at the time of some future mobilization, it was highly unlikely that it would ever be obtained during the decisive period of war or international emergency. We have not changed our thinking.

However, where this and the congressional report's comments about readiness fall apart—and this applies to the Air Force as well—is that C-ratings do not reflect the type of equipment on hand in units unless it is clearly rated non-deployable by Army or Air Force definition. This latter circumstance is why all nine Army Guard combat divisions are rated C-4 "not ready," a comment the Army not so often. On their state of training as the fact that none of the divisions has deployable air defense weapons issued. And none are in sight. Until Vulcan and Chaparral systems are procured and issued to these divisions, C-not-ready will remain their state of rated before their time.

The report also criticizes the shortage of maintenance parts, which it rates an "obstruction." The Senate Committee on Appropriations has increased the amount of money provided by Congress for defense, choices have had to be made between procurement of major items of equipment and O&M funding. Commanders at all levels would like to see more money for training military, more simulation devices, more flying hours, more frequent travel to an NBC environment, more travel to good training areas and more major exercises.

The question here is one of choices. Given limited money, what should be done with it? Buy equipment or spend money training troops and airmen on operating equipment and systems, rather than replacing those systems? We submit the proper answer, unless Congress makes much greater amounts of money available, is to press on with equipment procurement.

The House subcommittee report does one good thing: It focuses some attention on the current system of unit status reports, or C-ratings as we know them. Perhaps without intending to, the report points out some of the faults with the system, particularly in the active Army and Army Guard.

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