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THE NGUAS, we frequently like to point out that our policies are driven by the resolutions adopted at our General Conferences. Those of us in the Association’s leadership also add quickly that sometimes “targets of opportunity” or the requirement to provide factual explanations or play defense on an issue becomes vital.

For example, who would have thought that the United States in the Indochina National Guard would become a steering political issue in this year’s presidential election? It is said that one should view challenges as an opportunity rather than a problem. If so, we have had a great national opportunity to explain the role of the National Guard in today’s Total Force. We can only hope that the “National Guard issue” in this year’s campaign will have been laid to rest by the time this issue of Nation Guard reaches print. However, some comment from this Association seems in order, given our experiences in August. Rarely in recent years has so much attention by the national media been focused on the Guard. The Guard, so often the attention we received was not exactly to our liking. However, we have been afforded the opportunity to explain our mission and role in national defense to the media and the American people in a rather positive light.

In this last President’s Message as the NGAUS senior leader, I had intended to set forth my accomplishments during my two-year term in office. The nomination of Senator Dan Quayle and Representative William Goodling as vice presidential candidate and the resultant furor over his Indian National Guard service abruptly changed our focus during the past two months. It seems to me that a couple of points need to be made about the media reaction to Senator Quayle’s military service. The first is that his enlistment in the Indiana National Guard in 1969 is without blemish so far as we can ascertain. He enlisted in a unit with a vacancy (although many units had waiting lists in that era). To our knowledge, he served honorably for his six-year enlistment and was discharged in due course.

It must be emphasized in discussing Senator Quayle’s service that duty in the Guard and Reserve in the 1960s, and today, is honorable in all respects. The Congress many years earlier determined that enlistment in the Guard and Reserve would be an alternative for military service to those unable to serve in the military. Basically, from the initiation of the peacetime draft in the early 1950s until conscription was terminated in 1973, a young American had three alternatives in his early 20s. First, he could enlist in the regular services. Second, he could enlist in the Guard or Reserve. Or, third, he could take his chances with the Selective Service System.

The Vietnam era of draft calls generally is dated from President Lyndon B. Johnson’s speech in August 1965 when he announced large deployments of active component units to South Vietnam and a very substantial increase in draft calls. At the same time, Mr. Johnson eschewed any mobilization of the Guard and Reserve—despite the fact that this was unanimously recommended by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Mr. Johnson’s decision now is viewed as a purely political one, justified on several grounds.

The reason cited by then—Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara was that the Guard and Reserve were a “perishable asset” in the sense that once mobilized and used, they would not be subsequently available for further mobilization for the period of time necessary to demobilize them and reorganize and re-recruit the force.

These decisions in 1965 and later must be viewed through the lens of those times. President John F. Kennedy had mobilized two Guard divisions and other units in response to the Berlin Crisis of 1961. The year 1965 also saw the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the fear among many strategic planners that the Soviets might be on the move in central Europe. McNamara’s comment about a perishable asset and the requirement for a strategic reserve have to be recalled to gain the proper context today for the decisions made 20 and 25 years ago.

Of course, there was a political context to the Johnson decisions too. Many believed then and believe today that Lyndon Johnson wanted his “guns and butter” in that he didn’t want to threaten the financing of his “Great Society” social programs with a large, expensive military effort.

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