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Role of the Reserves in the Total Force Policy

Statement of
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Before the
Subcommittee on Readiness
House Committee on Armed Services



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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss the role of the reserve forces in the Total Force Concept and their ability to carry out assigned missions.

In the coming years, the Department of Defense (DOD) will be faced with budget constraints. One of the alternatives that it will likely consider is reducing the size of the active forces. If the active forces are reduced, however, who will perform the missions previously performed by the active forces? Should the roles and missions of the reserve forces be increased to offset reductions in the active forces?

Since 1980, in an attempt to hold down defense costs, DOD has steadily increased the size of its reserves and the number of missions assigned to them. Between 1980 and 1988, the reserves increased by about 289,000 persons. As of fiscal year 1988, the reserves represented about 35 percent of the total force.

This growth in the reserve forces is likely to continue because they are less costly to maintain than active forces. Although it may be cost-effective to increase the roles and missions of the reserves, a balance must be maintained between the cost benefits and military effectiveness.

The focus of my testimony will be on the difficulties that DOD faces concerning the reserve components. A full understanding of these issues will allow leaders to make informed decisions regarding whether to increase the roles and missions of the reserves. More specifically, I would like to discuss

-- the intent of DOD's Total Force Policy,

- the need to ensure that DOD develops criteria for determining the impact that expanded responsibilities for the reserves will have on military capability and resource requirements,
- the need to improve reserve training to ensure that the proper numbers of qualified personnel are recruited and trained, and
- the ability of the reserves to deploy to their intended areas of operations within the time frames prescribed in the operations plans.

Finally, I will conclude by discussing those factors that transcend the reserves and could impede the ability of all forces, active as well as reserves, to successfully carry out their assigned missions.

TOTAL FORCE POLICY

In the early 1970s, with the end of the draft and the beginning of the All Volunteer Force, DOD adopted the "Total Force Policy." This policy provides that reservists, rather than draftees, will be the initial and primary source of personnel to augment the active forces--particularly the early deploying forces--in a military emergency. According to the Reserve Forces Policy Board, reserve components of the armed forces are to be equal partners to their active force counterparts in peacetime as well as wartime and must be as ready as their active force counterparts.

Over the past several years, the quality, training, and equipping of the reserves have improved significantly, and the reserves are in better shape today than ever before. For the most part, these improvements have focused on combat forces. To some extent, these improvements have come at the expense of the support forces,

particularly Army support forces such as chemical and signal units in the combat support area and medical and ordnance units in the combat service-support area.

The integral part that the reserves play in the Total Force Policy is illustrated by the fact that reserve forces account for significant percentages of all the services' forces:

- About 50 percent of the Army's personnel strength are reserve forces. In terms of units, the reserves represent about 63 percent of the combat units, 80 percent of the combat support units, and 81 percent of the combat service-support units that would deploy to Europe in the event of a conflict.

- Reservists represent about 20 percent of the Navy's personnel, contributing 16 percent of the Navy's frigate personnel, 35 percent of the maritime air patrol squadrons, and 65 percent of the mobile construction battalions.

- About 24 percent of the Air Force's personnel are reserve forces. Thirty-three percent of its tactical fighter units, 60 percent of its tactical airlift units, and 45 percent of its air rescue and search elements are made up of reservists.

In addition to the significant numbers of personnel and missions assigned to the reserve components, many of these units have deployment dates that rival those of the active components. Thus, it is imperative that the reserve forces be properly trained and equipped in order to meet their mission responsibilities.

GUIDANCE FOR DETERMINING WHAT MISSIONS
TO ASSIGN TO THE RESERVES

How the Total Force is divided between the active and reserve components and which missions the reserves will perform are of critical importance to overall defense capability. Our prior work has shown a need for more definitive guidance in determining what roles and missions should be assigned to the reserve components under the Total Force Policy. Similar concerns have been voiced by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and congressional committees.

DOD recognizes the need for specific guidance to the services on what factors should be considered in the force mix and mission assignment decision processes. Guidance has not been provided because of difficulties in developing a methodology for making these decisions. Each of the services has established its own procedures and criteria for determining the appropriate mix of active and reserve forces and mission assignments, and often, the reasons and rationale for their decisions are not documented.

In the force mix and mission assignment decision-making processes, an important factor that needs to be considered is the desirability of having a particular type of unit made up of only reservists or a particular mission solely or primarily performed by the reserves. For example, all of the Army's infantry scout units and 73 percent of its medical units are made up of reservists. Likewise, all of the Navy's light attack helicopter squadrons and search and rescue squadrons are made up of reservists.

Recent events in the Persian Gulf illustrate the impact of a service's having a large percentage of its particular operational capability in the reserves. Eighty-two percent of the Navy's ocean minesweeping capability is in the reserves. The lack of this capability in the active force hampered the ability of the Navy to

respond to an emerging need in the Persian Gulf. The reserve ships had to be manned with active force sailors and reserve volunteers.

When a service decides to assign all or a large percentage of a particular mission to the reserves, it can limit the flexibility of commanders to respond rapidly to an emergency situation unless it also allows for a limited or general call-up of the reserves.

At a minimum, force mix and mission assignment decisions should be based on the following factors:

- the cost and capability of the reserve components to perform the particular mission and meet deployment dates;
- the impact of a particular force mix or mission decision on training requirements, including the type, length, and availability of training; and
- the impact of such decisions on recruiting requirements.

RECRUITING AND TRAINING THE RESERVES

The Reserve Forces Policy Board's most recent annual report stated that the lack of trained personnel was a significant factor limiting reserve readiness in fiscal year 1987. This assessment was confirmed in our August 1988 report to the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Armed Services entitled Military Capability: Readiness and Sustainability of U.S. Forces for a Conventional Conflict, (GAO/C-NSIAD-88-22, Aug. 1988). The report pointed out that the lack of skilled personnel was the major factor degrading the readiness of the reserve forces.

For example, of all the Army reserve component forces that would be called upon to respond in the event of a European conflict, about 42 percent reported that they required additional resources or

training to perform their assigned missions or that they were unable to perform their missions. The lack of skilled personnel was the primary reason for their reported degraded readiness condition.

In assessing the need for better reserve training, it is important to recognize that the reserves are a part-time force limited by the number of training days as well as the amount of time that reservists can take away from their civilian occupations. Reserve units are generally authorized only 38 days a year, and National Guard units 39 days a year to accomplish training. A recent Army study showed, however, that the average unit spends about 50 percent of its available training days on administrative matters.

Certain skill areas require long training periods in order to obtain a high level of proficiency, and time just may not be available for reservists to obtain these skills. This point was made by Navy officials who identified 89 enlisted positions that require 16 to 320 days of training to acquire the necessary skills. Because of these requirements, the Navy is having difficulty in filling these positions with qualified personnel. In our work on Army training issues, we identified 67 Army skill positions that require at least 4 months of training in order to obtain proficiency. These training requirements make it difficult for the Army reserve components to fill these positions with qualified personnel.

Unit training management also needs to be improved. Improvements here would help to compensate for the lack of time for training. In DOD's fiscal year 1987 Annual Statement of Assurance on internal controls, the Army identified the individual and unit training of National Guard personnel as a material weakness. For example, individual training programs had not been established for those personnel not qualified in their duty positions; skill qualification test results were not being used to identify

weaknesses in individual or unit training; and mission-essential training was not always scheduled. As a result, there was no assurance that soldiers received training in all the required tasks.

A further indication of the lack of skill proficiency is the rate at which reservists successfully pass skill qualification tests. In fiscal year 1987, only about 32 of the reservists in the Army National Guard and Reserves required to take a skill qualification test actually took the test. Of these 156,000 reservists, about 65 percent passed the test. In contrast, of the 450,000 active duty soldiers who took the test during the same period, 92 percent passed.

Our prior work has also indicated that the lack of skilled personnel in the reserves may be even worse than acknowledged by the reserve components. Army data indicates that about 73 percent of its Army National Guard and Reserve personnel are qualified. However, this percentage only relates to the number of personnel who have been assigned the military occupational specialties of the positions they occupy. Also, even this 75 percent are not necessarily fully qualified to perform all the critical tasks of the positions to which they are assigned. In fact, our work has shown that, while the Army may classify an individual as qualified, individuals in many specialties might have received training in only 28 to 57 percent of the critical tasks required to perform their jobs.

Recruiting problems are also factors that contribute to the lack of skilled personnel. To illustrate, the reserves rely to a great extent on their ability to recruit persons with prior military service to meet their personnel needs. While these individuals are already trained, their former military skills often do not match the skill needs of the units they join. Consequently, they must be retrained. In fiscal year 1987, about one-half of the

Army National Guard's and the Marine Corps' Reserve enlistments were prior service personnel. According to the services, about one-half of these personnel required retraining in order to give them the needed skills.

Additionally, geographic constraints impact on the reserves' ability to attract personnel with the skills needed. DOD directives provide that a unit may only recruit from that pool of individuals living within 100 miles of the unit's location. Persons with the needed skills are not always available in the locale. Also, reservists who relocate may not be able to find units in need of their particular skills.

Still another factor that affects the reserves' ability to attract needed personnel in the numbers required is the declining pool of persons in the 18- to 24-year age group. According to recent studies, this pool of resources is expected to decline until after 1996. Thus, to the extent that the reserves increase their personnel requirements, the current problem will be compounded.

THE ABILITY OF RESERVE FORCES TO MEET DEPLOYMENT SCHEDULES

Because of the important role that reserve component units play in the Total Force Concept and the warfighting commanders' heavy reliance on these units to accomplish their wartime objectives, it is critical that these units be able to deploy when required.

Many of the combat, combat support, and combat service-support units in the Army National Guard and Reserves have deployment dates that require them to be in their assigned theaters of operations within 60 days after the initiation of hostilities. However, many of these same units report a readiness status or condition that calls into question their ability to meet these commitments. To illustrate, 77 percent of the Army reserve component units

scheduled to be in the European theater within the first 60 days reported that (1) they required additional resources or training in order to do their tasks or (2) they were unable to perform their assigned missions.

Readiness deficiencies in reserve components could severely limit the ability and flexibility of the warfighting commanders to fulfill their mission objectives. In fact, the warfighting commanders may be faced with a choice of (1) delaying deployment until deficiencies are corrected or (2) accepting units that may not be able to fully perform their assigned missions.

OTHER FACTORS AFFECTING THE TOTAL FORCE

There are other factors that transcend the reserves, affecting U.S. forces as a whole. There continue to be sizable disparities between requirements and the resources available to meet them. For example, airlift and sealift capabilities are significantly below stated requirements, and forces may not be able to deploy when needed.

There are also serious shortages of sustainability items, particularly highly technical, sophisticated munitions, such as air-to-air and air-to-ground missiles in the Air Force and Navy and surface-to-air munitions in the Army. Certain U.S. forces may exhaust their medical and petroleum, oil, and lubricant supplies before the first major battle is concluded.

Commanders of the major warfighting commands have consistently expressed concerns about their ability to sustain their forces because of the airlift and sealift problems and the significant shortages of critically needed sustainability items.

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In conclusion, the reserves account for a large and very important part of the services' Total Forces. While a major advantage of the reserves is that they are relatively inexpensive to maintain, a major disadvantage is their lack of readiness.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions.