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# RESERVES AND READINESS: APPRAISING THE TOTAL FORCE POLICY

*Relying on the reserves makes good sense. But the Army has yet to bring practice in line with principles.*

**O**PERATION DESERT STORM did a lot to improve the image of the American "citizen soldier." Large numbers of reserve forces from all the military services—more than 225,000 individuals in all—left their families, communities, and regular jobs to serve their country in a far-away desert. Their fellow citizens, watching by television back home, saw these reservists performing in many different capacities with obvious dedication and professionalism.

Such scenes might not have occurred but for something called the Total Force Policy. Adopted by the Department of Defense (DOD) in 1973, in the aftermath of Vietnam, this policy's primary objective has been to maintain as small an active peacetime force as possible by placing greater reliance on reserve forces. Not only are reserve forces less expensive to maintain, but the need for their participation in any major conflict was seen as a way of ensuring more widespread support among the American people once a war was under way.

This strategy seems to have worked as intended during the recent Persian Gulf conflict: Reservists from so many walks of life were called to serve that a large number of Americans had a personal stake in the war.

At the same time, however, the Total Force Policy has recently come under vigorous debate. For one thing, separating average citizens from their everyday lives raised enough problems—care for the children of military couples; financial hardships imposed on some families accustomed to much larger incomes; the stripping of police, fire, and medical protection from small communities—that some have begun to doubt that the Total Force Policy is a wise approach. More importantly, questions about the policy have been raised by the Army's apparent reluctance to call on its combat reserves to serve in the Gulf.

While all the services have increasingly relied on reserves under the Total Force Policy, the policy's impact has been most dramatic in the Army: Today, members of the Army Reserve and the National Guard make up 52 percent of all Army personnel, including half of the Army's combat troops and about two-thirds of its support forces. Nevertheless, almost all of the 146,409 Army reservists called to active duty during the recent conflict

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States. A publicly funded federal system would add hundreds of billions of dollars to the federal budget and would require a significant tax increase. A state-administered system would have similar effects on the state level. The fact that the total funds required would be no more (and possibly less) than current total health-care spending by all sectors would carry little weight amid rising deficits and calls for smaller government. In addition, the U.S. public, unlike Canada's, deeply distrusts many government programs and is not likely to embrace a purely public system. For these reasons, a publicly funded option probably will not soon receive the consideration it merits.

That leaves us with the third alternative as the most feasible. Universal coverage would provide for the almost 37 million Americans without health insurance, and given appropriate controls, it would also contain costs. A regulated universal system could include mandated employer-provided insurance, a federally assisted plan (expanding upon or replacing Medicaid) for low-income and high-risk populations, and an improved Medicare program.

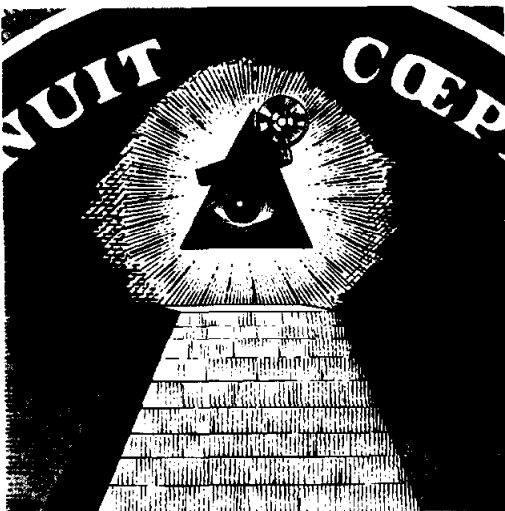
The first element, an employer mandate, would cover much of the nearly 15 percent of the U.S. population presently uninsured, since most of these people are employed or the dependents of employed workers. Specifically, if most employers were required to offer health insurance for everyone working 25 hours per week or more, almost two-thirds of the previously uninsured would be covered. (Various proposals for employer-mandated insurance have enumerated many possible arrangements—too complex to describe here—for covering the self-employed, employees at small businesses, and other special cases.) Congress should find this approach very attractive because employers, not the government, would bear the costs.

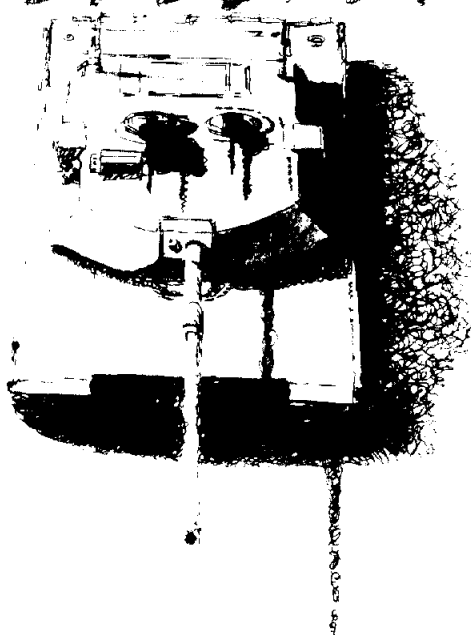
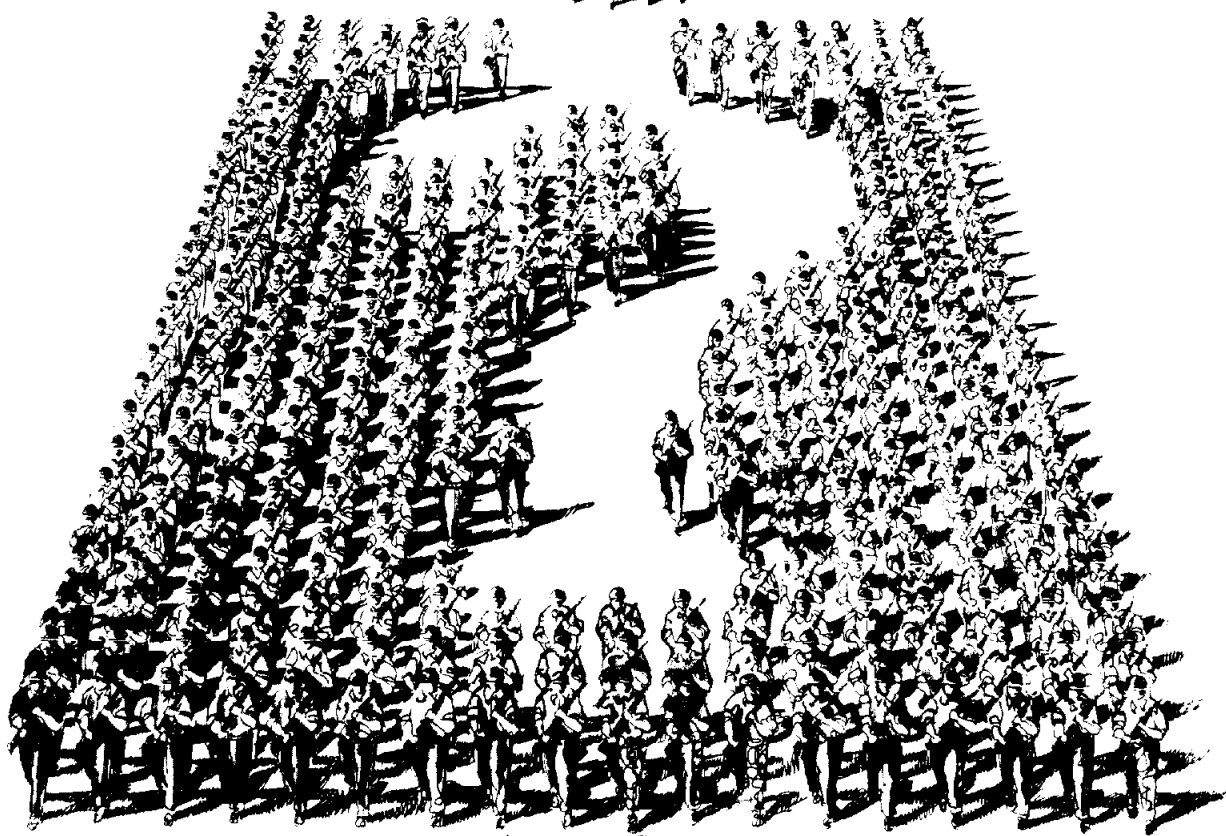
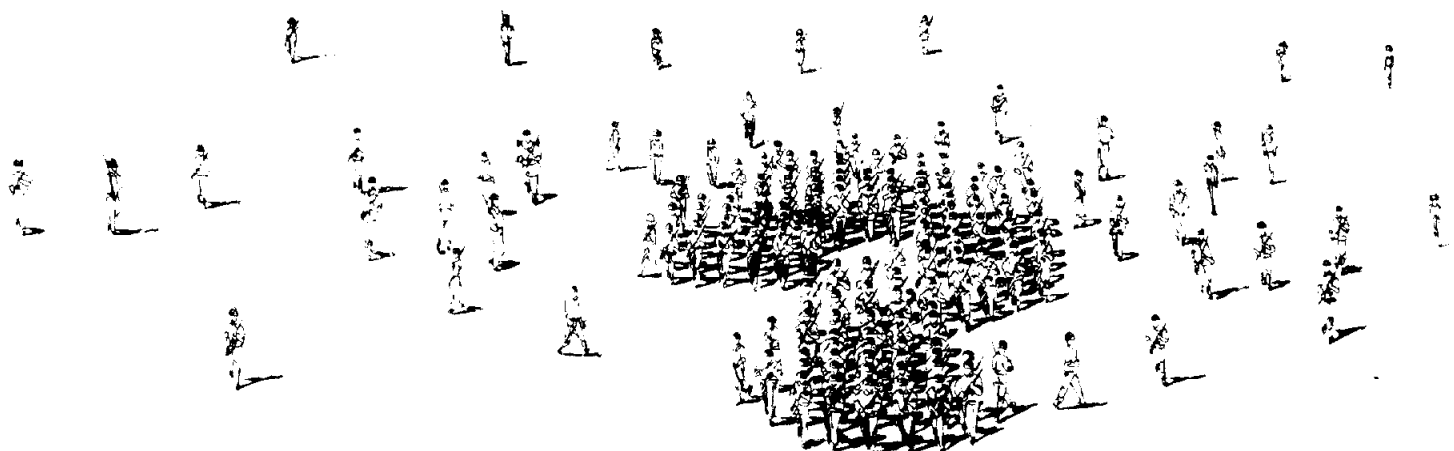
The employer mandate would, in turn, substantially reduce the size of the second element—Medicaid or a federally funded alternative—because many low-income citizens would be eligible for insurance through their workplaces. And Medicare benefits could be expanded to cover some long-term care. Funds to extend both Medicaid and Medicare could come from taxing employer-paid health insurance, increasing excise taxes on tobacco and alcohol products, or imposing a value-added tax similar to that used widely in Europe as well as in Canada and Japan.

Because it would not set limits on total spending, the system would require other mechanisms to control overall costs; these could vary from state to state. One such mechanism is strict regulation of payers, an approach now in use in some states. States that prefer a market-based system might promote cost-effective competition through various regulations and economic incentives (an approach called “managed competition”).

Any comprehensive cost-control initiative should address two other issues. One is capital investment—the expansion of facilities or equipment, which tends to increase the use of costly treatments. Various approaches already exist for controlling capital expenditures; some are in limited use now, and others have been used in the past. The second issue is the oversupply of physicians, especially specialists, that drives up both physician costs and treatment rates. National policies—supported by appropriate changes in funding—are necessary to control not only the overall number of physicians being trained but also the mix of specialties.

Intense public interest about the escalating cost of care, the significant number of Americans uninsured, and alternative systems abroad indicates a window of opportunity for changing our nation's health-care system. Let us hope that we in the United States have the wisdom, compassion, and political will to seize the moment. ●





served in support rather than combat capacities. It was not until November 1990—and then only after some pressure from Congress—that the President called up a limited number of National Guard combat units. And these units were never deployed to the Gulf, but simply remained in training until the war was over.

Critics complained that this failure to call up and then to deploy the combat reserves was inconsistent with the Total Force Policy. These critics were right. According to the policy, combat missions should be assigned to reserve units only if they can be made ready to fight by the expected deployment date. And although the Army might argue that it never expected to have to deploy these units so quickly, the fact is that they were not deployed even after a considerable amount of post-mobilization training—more than commanders had initially estimated would be needed to prepare them for combat. By its actions, then, even if not by its words, the Army was making clear that it did not consider these troops ready to deploy.

Does this mean that the Total Force Policy doesn't work and should be scrapped? Not necessarily. The problem may be not so much with the policy itself but with how it has been implemented. In fact, GAO has found<sup>1</sup> that actions taken by the Army to equip and train its reserve forces over the past decade have not always been consistent with the Total Force Policy; moreover, weaknesses in program management and internal controls, as well as deviations from stated priorities, have prevented the Army from fully achieving the policy's objectives. The Gulf War has further underscored the contradictions between key principles of the policy and the Army's implementation of it. In particular, the risks of substituting less costly personnel, such as reserves, for their more expensive active-force counterparts have not always been fully assessed; reserves assigned to combat roles have not always been mission-ready by the expected time of deployment; and training of reservists has not always been adequate.

## **Substitutability**

**B**ecause the Total Force Policy was intended to reduce the size of this country's active military force and the costs of maintaining it, it has been important to use active-duty personnel only for

jobs that cannot be effectively performed by other individuals. Therefore, U.S. reserve forces and civilians, as well as workers ("host-nation personnel") from the countries where U.S. forces are stationed, are to be substituted for active forces whenever possible. Given DOD plans to reduce active Army personnel by about 200,000 over the next four years, this policy seems not only reasonable but probably the only way the Army can meet its wartime requirements.

But have these substitutions been effective so far? In examining Army restructurings of the 1980s, GAO found<sup>2</sup> that the Army may have made wholesale substitutions for active-duty forces without fully assessing the risks involved. The resulting weaknesses in the force structure were revealed during the Gulf War; if the war had lasted longer than it did, these weaknesses might have had troubling consequences.

For example, because responsibilities for supporting combat troops are concentrated in the reserve forces, and because of the three-week delay in calling up the reserves and the time required to ready them to deploy, there were some logistical shortfalls early in the deployment. Had hostilities erupted at once, sustaining combat troops would have been difficult.

Another problem had to do with the different categories of reserve forces and when they were called. The Army's reserve forces consist of the National Guard, the Army Reserve, and the Individual Ready Reserve (individuals who, rather than joining a reserve unit after their active-duty tour, simply join the IRR pool, which carries no training requirements). The Army counted on Individual Ready Reservists to bring many reserve units up to wartime strength when a partial or full mobilization was called. But the President did not call a partial mobilization providing access to the IRR until January 29, 1991—just three weeks before the ground war finally began. In the interim, some reserve units activated under the President's limited callup authority could be filled only by extensive transfers from other active and reserve units or by volunteers. In the end, many units left for the Gulf without their full complement of personnel.

The Gulf War also demonstrated that the shifting geopolitical situation in the world requires shifts in the Army's plans to rely on host-nation personnel. Because Army forces used to be geared toward the prospect of a major conflict in Europe,

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the Army planned to rely heavily on German personnel to carry out many support functions, such as transportation. But there were almost no similar arrangements to employ Middle Eastern personnel. If the United States had not had extraordinary cooperation from its allies, serious logistical shortfalls would have occurred.

One questionable substitution the Army has made is to employ civilians to maintain the National Guard's equipment during peacetime. As a result of this policy, according to an ongoing GAO study, at least one Guard brigade training for the Gulf War was unprepared to keep its own equipment running effectively.

These examples are not intended to show that the Army's reliance on reserves, civilians, and host-nation personnel is misplaced. Rather, the lesson is this: If the Army decides to substitute other personnel for its active forces, then it should fully assess the risks involved and take steps to compensate for those risks. Furthermore, it must make sure that current laws allow for quick access to those reserves needed to fill out Army units. Otherwise, a war that rapidly escalated might find U.S. forces falling short.

## Readiness

Another principle underlying the Total Force Policy is that key roles should be assigned to reserve units only if they *will* be called up by the President and *can* be mission-ready by the time they are expected to deploy. This principle appears reasonable and sound—even overly obvious, perhaps. Unfortunately, the Army has deviated from it in major ways.

Probably the clearest example is the Army's callup of three National Guard "roundout" brigades. Divisions within the Army are divided into brigades (each of which contains 4,000 troops); brigades are divided into battalions; battalions are divided into companies. Two of the divisions that were deployed to the Persian Gulf are composed of two active-duty brigades and one National Guard brigade to be called up when needed to round out the division. But during the Gulf War, the Army was clearly reluctant to call up its National Guard roundout brigades. One of these—the 48th National Guard brigade from Georgia—was attached

to the 24th Infantry Division, one of the first divisions to deploy to the Gulf. The 48th had trained with the 24th at the National Training Center; it possessed the most modern equipment, including Abrams tanks and Bradley Fighting Vehicles; and it reported that it would be ready to deploy after 28 days of post-mobilization training. Yet even after it had trained for 70 days, the Army still had not declared it combat-ready.

Actually, the Army's assessment was probably accurate. What violated the principles of the Total Force Policy was not the Army's reluctance to deploy these brigades but rather their lack of readiness. GAO observed the roundout brigades in training at the National Training Center and at Fort Hood and noted numerous deficiencies. For example, the 48th was short roughly 600 personnel, including 176 equipment maintainers whose participation was crucial. The brigades lacked certain individual and crew skills, which decreased their ability to perform collectively; for instance, additional gunnery training had to be provided to the brigades before they could meet the Army's standards. Leadership in the brigades was inadequate, since many of the noncommissioned officers had not received the necessary leadership training.

Similar problems cropped up on the support side, GAO found. At one mobilization site, units arrived without the required deployment plans for their equipment. Some equipment had to be shipped before logistics evaluations were made and equipment deficiencies were corrected. And certain units had to deploy using equipment on which they had never trained. At this site, Army personnel concluded that the majority of the reserve soldiers were unable to meet the Army's minimum physical fitness standards; lacked confidence in their ability to deal with nuclear, biological, or chemical warfare; and may have been unprepared to cope with the stress of combat. As a result, mobilization personnel questioned whether these reserve units would be able to accomplish their missions once deployed.

Another problem cropped up because of the Army's "first-to-fight" policy, which states that priority for manning, training, and equipping units should be established on the basis of which units are expected to see action first, regardless of whether they are reserve or active forces. Again, in principle this policy makes sense, and because of it the Army has placed a high priority on manning and equipping both active and reserve combat

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units. It has not, however, placed as high a priority on preparing its support units. Ironically, the reserve combat units, which were given priority in equipment fielding, were not deployed to the Gulf, while reserve support units, shortchanged in peacetime, were among the first to be called up. Because these reserve support units had been authorized only about 90 percent of their required wartime personnel—and because many of them had been unable to recruit enough personnel to reach even this standard—extensive transfers of personnel and equipment were required for many units to deploy. In the end, these units had to deploy at lower readiness levels than their combat counterparts.

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Finally, in addition to the question of whether reserve units can be ready, there is the more fundamental question of whether they will even be called. Although the policy states that units can be assigned combat roles “only if the units can *and will* be called up,” such callups have been rare. In fact, President Bush was the first president to call up the reserves in 40 years. The Gulf War may mark a reversal of this trend; still, many observers question whether the President would have called up the reserves if the scope of the anticipated conflict had not virtually forced him to do so.

## Training

**R**elated to the entire question of readiness, of course, is the issue of training. A third key principle of the Total Force Policy is that reservists should be adequately trained for their missions by the time they are expected to deploy. But GAO’s work has shown that reserve training strategies have not met this objective.

In particular, reserve combat organizations suffer from a number of problems that make it difficult to get adequate training done during the 39

days that are allotted for it each year. This comes to less than one-sixth of the time available to active units. Furthermore, administrative matters can consume as much as half of the training time on weekends.

Another problem is that most Army schools provide training in only some of the tasks considered crucial to proper job performance. For nearly one-third of the Army’s 350 occupational specialties, Army schools provide less than 80 percent of the needed training. Large numbers of reservists occupy positions for which they have been taught less than 60 percent of the critical job tasks. Accordingly, a considerable responsibility rests with Army Reserve and Guard units to provide training in tasks not covered by Army schools. Although this same strategy is used to train active Army soldiers, it poses a much greater problem for the reserves because of their more limited training time.

An individual’s transition from active to reserve status can also create gaps in training. Because some former active-duty soldiers join reserve units that do not need the skills they gained on active duty, about half of the National Guardsmen who enlist need retraining. But many of them never get it because they cannot afford to be absent from their jobs for the several weeks that retraining would require.

Training for reserves may also fail to prepare units for realistic battle conditions. For example, training in crew skills such as gunnery is not always adequate because soldiers get the opportunity to practice with live ammunition only once every two years; even then, the same firing ranges are used repeatedly, which allows soldiers to become so familiar with the courses that any assessments of their proficiency become unrealistic. Furthermore, reserve crews are not held to the same firing-time standards as the active Army. Other training problems crop up because of shortages of authorized equipment, lack of realistic training missions, failure to require units to demonstrate battlefield survival skills, and inadequate opportunities to train as a combined arms team.

These problems are all the more troubling in

light of the Army's lack of an accurate means of assessing the readiness of its units, whether active or reserve.<sup>1</sup> Once a critical early deployment role is assigned to a reserve unit, the Army should maintain an accurate, up-to-date evaluation of that unit's readiness. But GAO has found that, during the recent war, the Army could not depend on the accuracy of its own readiness reports. According to personnel at Army headquarters and major commands, inaccurate readiness reporting led the Army to wrong conclusions about the amount of training that units would need before they could deploy. At one mobilization site, *none* of the units that arrived for processing were at the readiness status indicated by the Army's official records.

## Making the system work

**T**he fact that the Total Force Policy has not been implemented effectively should not be taken as a reason to drop it. In fact, continuing pressures to reduce defense spending make increased reliance on reserve forces all the more necessary. Therefore, the Army should attempt to better achieve the policy's aims, either by lowering its expectations of what reserve soldiers can be capable of or by improving its implementation of the policy.

If it chooses the first option, the Army will need to reexamine the advisability of assigning early-deployment combat roles to the reserves. Thirty-nine days of training a year, especially used as they are now, may simply not be enough to get reserve soldiers ready to face combat. Similarly, a single training course, or participation in exercises conducted under unrealistic conditions, may not adequately prepare reserve leaders for the challenges of commanding combined arms teams. The Army may need to limit early-deployment missions to its active forces, with reserves carrying out later-deploying missions. Another wise step might be to avoid having entire 4,000-soldier roundout brigades

composed of reserve personnel and instead to employ the roundout concept at a lower level, in battalions or companies, since smaller groups could better focus their peacetime training efforts.

If the Army selects the second option—improving its implementation of the Total Force Policy—it will need to take a hard look at how it can best overcome past shortcomings in preparing its reserves to carry out their missions. A first step should be to effectively implement the Army's Reserve Component Training Strategy, which was developed in 1989 to emphasize the training and development of reserve leaders and to focus the training of companies and battalions on selected critical missions.

Whichever of these two routes the Army takes, persistent budgetary pressures will require other changes in the Army's current strategies for staffing, equipping, and training its units. Some innovative approaches may be possible. For example, the further downsizing of the Army's active forces that is now planned should free up equipment and training funds for reserves. It may make sense to require different amounts of training for different types of reserve units: Combat units might receive more than they do now, support units less. Priorities for allocating resources may also have to be more clearly defined, with support units most likely to be deployed early in future conflicts being given a higher priority than at present. Above all, as it makes these and other changes, the Army will need to ensure that its actions further the integration of active and reserve forces, removing the barriers that unfortunately have not yet been broken down by the Total Force Policy. •

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1. *Army Reserve Components: Minimum Essential Equipment for Training Has Not Been Effectively Managed* (GAO/NSIAD-90-136, May 25, 1990). *Army Training: Management Initiatives Needed to Enhance Reservists' Training* (GAO/NSIAD-89-140, June 30, 1989).

2. *Army Force Structure: Lessons to Apply in Structuring Tomorrow's Army* (GAO/NSIAD-91-3, November 29, 1990).

3. *Army Training: Evaluations of Units' Proficiency Are Not Always Reliable* (GAO/NSIAD-91-72, February 15, 1991).

