



Preserve the Reserves

Why America needs its citizen-soldiers now more than ever.

By: Christopher Holshek - March 15, 2013

As the end of the draft in 1972 ushered in the era of the professional force we know today, the military instituted another key reform that transformed America's ability to wage war, at least on a large scale. Still smarting from the failure of the nation's body politic to do what had been done in every major war prior to Vietnam -- namely, to call up the militia -- a group of Army generals, among them Creighton Abrams, John Vessey, and Edward C. Meyer, introduced the Total Force Policy.

More than just a way to manage another postwar demobilization, the Abrams Doctrine, as it was also known, transformed the Reserve and National Guard from being shelters to avoid service into integral parts of the nation's war machine. The policy made it strategically and operationally impracticable to engage in serious conflict without calling up America's part-time troops.

By placing the majority of the Army's combat support capabilities in the Reserve component, where they largely remain today, the policy ensured that Congress, as well as the president, would be involved in deciding matters of war and peace. This made it harder to engage in a major war without the support of the American people. And by weaving citizen-soldiers back into the fabric of the military, the military would be woven back into the fabric of the country, thus maintaining a healthy, democratic civil-military relationship.

It appears we have reached a similarly pivotal decision point in our civil-military history.

The winding down of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is forcing the United States to realign and rebalance foreign policy and national security commitments in ways that are more cost-effective. Overwhelming fiscal pressures are mounting to the point where even defense spending is no longer sacrosanct. Politicians are realizing, as Foreign Policy's Gordon Adams has put it, that "it is high time to start thinking about how to manage a serious drawdown instead of pretending it will not happen." Columnist David Brooks noted that the President Obama may have appointed Chuck Hagel as secretary of defense chiefly to "supervise the beginning of this generation-long process of defense cutbacks."

Yet these constraints present strategic opportunities more than national dilemmas. Among them is the opportunity to exploit improvements in the Reserves over the past dozen or so years to provide a relatively ready force that can be drawn upon for missions

across the "full spectrum" of peace and conflict -- small- as well as large-scale -- at about one-third the price.

The most recent report of the Reserve Forces Policy Board (RFPB) concluded that while Reserve component forces comprise 39 percent of the total force, they account for 16 percent of the costs. It calculated that an Active component service member costs taxpayers \$384,000 compared to \$123,000 for his counterpart in the Reserves, which would translate into about \$2.6 billion in savings for every 10,000 positions shifted from full-time to part-time.

According to Chief of the Army Reserve Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Talley, the Army Reserve "comprises almost 20 percent of the Total Army and for just 6 percent of the Army budget...with the lowest ratio of full-time support to headquarters per capita (less than one percent), and the lowest ratio of full-time support to end-strength (13.1 percent) in the Department of Defense."

"The RFPB did not suggest changes to the Active Component or Reserve Component end strength, nor did it comment on balance and mix," noted Robert Feidler of the Reserve Officer Association. "But the implications of its report are obvious. If the Active Component does suffer substantial personnel cuts, the logical place to locate the resources -- which may be critical but are used only sporadically -- is the Reserve Component."

From Back-Ups to Bench Players

While reservists may cost one-third the money, they are hardly one-third the soldiers. Today's Reserve component force of over one million troops is not your daddy's Cadillac, taken out and driven only on weekends. Despite chronic underinvestment in some areas, the gaps in professionalism and performance have narrowed to the point where reservists in the field are hardly distinguishable from their active-duty counterparts. This owes mainly to a decade of intense operations in combat zones. At various times, 30-40 percent of deployed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan have been mobilized citizen-soldiers. Since 9/11, more than 860,000 Reserve personnel have served active tours of duty.

Now, more than simply providing strategic depth during big wars, the Reserves have grown to fill a variety of roles. The Pentagon's 2008 *Integrated Security Posture Statement* concluded that the Reserve component is best suited for steady state engagement, stability operations, homeland defense, and humanitarian assistance missions -- as well as major combat operations. Rather than just back-ups, they have become bench players who can do things others can't.

The Reserves are ideal for the security cooperation missions that will increasingly be part of America's efforts to maintain global leadership and influence. In places like Africa, where the United States is venturing further, security has long been community-based -- more a function of socioeconomic development. The latest *National Security Strategy* looks to "tap the ingenuity outside government through strategic partnerships with the private sector, nongovernmental organizations, foundations, and community-based civil society organizations." And there is no national entity that better utilizes non-government resources than the Reserves.

The ultimate strategic and social capital of the Reserves lies in the fact that they are first and foremost citizens. "America's greatest asset is its people," the *National Security Strategy* adds. "We must foster even deeper connections among Americans and people around the globe. Our long-term security will come not from our ability to instill fear in other peoples, but through our capacity to speak to their hopes. And that work will best be done through the power of the decency and dignity of the American people -- our troops and diplomats, but also our private sector, nongovernmental organizations, and citizens."

A perfect example of this work is the 20-year-old State Partnership Program of the National Guard, involving 65 nations worldwide, 28 of them in the Western Hemisphere alone. Utilizing citizen-ambassadors as well as citizen-soldiers, no other initiative more directly and broadly connects communities in America with communities abroad. Drawing now upon combat experience, they play a critical role in democratizing as well as professionalizing partner-nation forces. With more focused management and other program improvements, even more can be done.

If, in its strategic redirection, the United States intends to "lead through civilian power" as suggested in the first *Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review*, then enhancing the Reserves makes even more sense. Long upholding a civil-military relationship critical to the nation's sociopolitical vitality, maintenance of its national values, and its democratic soft power, the Reserves help legitimize U.S. political-military efforts. Given the relevance of "global public engagement" to the 21st century international environment, these comparative advantages can be neither underestimated nor overlooked.

Civil-military transition management, for example, is something every reservist contends with, if not every month then with every deployment -- faced with complexities and uncertainties unfamiliar to most of their active counterparts. This is the main reason, for example, why more than 85 percent of Army Civil Affairs -- a crucial capability for stability and security engagement operations -- is in the Reserve component. Being largely from the private sector, they have a different approach to risk and opportunity that may be more conducive to persistent engagement strategies -- especially those that look to "build partnership capacity," as called for in the *Quadrennial Defense Review*.

Necessary Soldiers

The Reserves represent a great bargain, particularly in a time of shrinking resources, and their experience and know-how should not be wasted. Their transition into an operational as well as a strategic resource -- their most significant qualitative transformation in the last century -- makes it possible for them to play a greater role in defending the United States than even Abrams envisioned. The way to maintain the nation's return on its investment in the part-time force is to use it in steady-state missions, to further develop its human capital and equipment, and to continue to overhaul its cumbersome Cold War-era financial and personnel systems.

Although recent legislation has enabled the Reserves to deploy in support of disasters such as Hurricane Sandy and to perform homeland defense missions, and although most commands can now deploy soldiers directly to the area of operations, authorities to call up individual reservists or small teams for short-term tours of duty abroad are still a work in progress. Additionally, more could be done to allow Active and Reserve

component personnel to migrate back and forth across the "continuum of service" in order to improve force management and retention, access personnel with special backgrounds and skills more easily, and ultimately save even more on costs.

The great contributions the Reserves could make are not matched by advocacy on Capitol Hill, and in many ways they are still resisted by a defense establishment heavily slanted toward the full-timers. It is remarkable, for example, that none of the articles the services have written for *Foreign Policy* on the future force make any mention of the Reserve component. Nor do most of the major studies coming out of Washington's think tanks.

Relying more on the Reserves would help restore balance in America's distorted civil-military relationship. Additionally, as the Cato Institute's Benjamin Friedman posited, a smaller active military "would not only save a fortune but also encourage policymakers to employ the armed services less promiscuously, keeping American troops -- and the country at large -- out of needless trouble." Reintroducing a smaller standing army and larger militia as in the first 150 years of U.S. history would also help reinvigorate America's moral standing abroad as a nation that looks, as Elihu Root said, "not to promote war but preserve peace."

And it could help with reform at home. As James R. Locher III, a prime mover on the Goldwater-Nichols reorganization, pointed out: "The Reserves are ideally situated to play a major role as a driver and shaping force to national security transformation, and more than because of their obvious stakeholder status.... Being mainly outside the government structure, in the private sector, their far-reaching influence in and out of Washington can also play a critical role in...addressing challenges that threaten everyone and developing opportunities that benefit all."

Jefferson's "unnecessary soldier" has been the paradox of the national strength and character of the United States. It has not been the warrior who has saved us in times of clear and present danger, or made America much the envy of the world. It has been the citizen who becomes one, whenever and wherever in need.