The Gradual Shift to an Operational Reserve

Reserve Component Mobilizations in the 1990s

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Sgt. Blair Smolar (*left*) adjusts the pack of fellow Virginia National Guard soldier Sgt. Ovidio Perez 29 December 1997 in Bosanki Brod, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The solders were assigned to guard the Slavonski Brod bridge over the Sava River, which runs along the Croatian–Bosnia and Herzegovina border. "It's ironic that I'm here now in this capacity," said Smolar, explaining that he grew up amid Serbians, Croatians, and Bosnians in East Chicago, Indiana, and had gone to Bosnia on his own twice in 1995 for humanitarian reasons. (Photo by Ron Alvey / ©1997, 2019 *Stars and Stripes*, All Rights Reserved)

The transition of the Army's reserve component from a strategic to an operational reserve is often heralded as one of the greatest changes to the Army at large in the twenty-first century. A pervasive attitude across the force is that this was a sudden shift that happened after 11 September 2001. Surely, the reserve component mission set and attitude was reoriented that day around the newly defined Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). However, the consistent, rotational use of the National Guard and Army Reserve was a gradual evolution formed around decades-old changes in force structure, not a sudden shift made in reaction to the acts of terrorists. Continued adherence to this narrative is not only playing fast and loose with data, it hinders our ability as military practitioners to properly understand the current condition of the force or properly learn from the lessons of the past to plan for a post-GWOT future.

Long before 11 September 2001, the Army began using National Guard and Army Reserve units for operations short of total mobilization, even becoming dependent upon the reserve component just to maintain everyday operations. Consistent use of the Guard and Reserve created a sense of comfort that reserve component mobilizations would meet the needs of the Army without reimplementing the draft, reducing worldwide commitments, or forward basing additional active component troops.

To step back a bit, let's examine what the reserve component units were already doing on the morning of 11 September 2001. The most critical Army commitment abroad was Operation Joint Forge, the peacekeeping mission to Bosnia-Herzegovina. The rotation underway in 2001 was notable because it was the first time that a reserve component unit—in this case, the 49th Armored Division of the Texas National Guard—served as an operational headquarters for active component units. Within that year, National Guard infantry brigades from North Carolina, Georgia, and Oklahoma served in that mission.[1] National Guard rotational deployments in Europe totaled 12,777 personnel that year. Outside of Europe, rotations of National Guard units provided force protection for the Patriot missile batteries in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia as well as for two aviation task forces consisting of attack helicopters, assault helicopters, and air traffic controllers in Kuwait. A rear area operations center provided support for the 1st Infantry Division at Camp Able Sentry in Macedonia. In Southern Command, 12,600 Army National Guard soldiers from forty-one states were mobilized to Central America, largely for extended hurricane relief operations.[2] These totals were large enough to demonstrate worldwide presence for peacetime citizen-soldiers, levels of command, deployments at battalion and brigade levels, and a composition of one-third of all Army overseas operations—before GWOT began.

Examining how the reserve components were so postured during peacetime would require our discussion to step back another two decades. To keep it brief, the reserve component restructuring that emerged in 1970, known as the "Abrams Doctrine" in Army circles in honor of the Army chief of staff who shepherded it or formally as the Total Force Policy, created space for a fundamentally different Guard and Reserve. However, the initial decision to restructure the reserve component was in direct response to U.S. involvement in another lengthy expedition: the war in Vietnam.[3]

The decision not to mobilize the National Guard until late in the Vietnam War was made with a direct eye toward avoiding a difficult public response to an unpopular war. President Lyndon B. Johnson, against the advice of his secretary of defense and Joint Chiefs of Staff, believed that a full mobilization of the reserve components would signal an escalation of the war to the Chinese and Russians, as well as betray his campaign promise to not "send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing themselves."[4] As Johnson's secretary of defense, Melvin Laird, described it, "As unpopular as the draft was, it was still an easier sell for Johnson than deploying the whole National Guard and Reserve from communities in middle America."[5] By the end of the war, the National Guard in particular had been so cannibalized by previous calls for augmentee forces and equipment that it made whole-unit deployments nearly impossible. All told, only three thousand Guard and Reserve soldiers were involuntarily mobilized for Vietnam.[6] This reinforced the reputation of the reserve component as a place to avoid the draft. Total Force planners outlined a plan attempting to alleviate the potential for this to happen again by structuring crucial theater-opening and civil affairs functions solely within the Guard and Reserve force structure. Though the policy is nicknamed "The Abrams Doctrine," an Air National Guardsman from Alabama and deputy assistant secretary of the Air Force for reserve affairs,

Theodore C. Marrs, was the "architect of the Total Force."[7] The Total Force was now reliant on the reserve component to wage war. A second-order effect of Guard and Reserve mobilization for a major conflict would be that the burden of service would be more connected to communities and more evenly distributed across geographic, socioeconomic, and racial lines. Public support would be a control measure as units mobilized.[8]

As the Total Force moved from plan to policy, several principles remained untested. Would the Guard and Reserve be capable of providing enough trained and ready forces to compensate for the overall reduction in the size of the Army? What would be a large enough war to justify using the Guard and Reserve? How would the public react to seeing the first large-scale, whole-unit deployments since World War II? *The Army Mobilization Operations Planning and Execution System (AMOPEs)* and Forces Command (FORSCOM) Regulation 500-3-3, *FORSCOM Mobilization and Deployment Planning System (FORMDEPS),* publications reveal that the Army force planners assumed that any large-scale use of Guard and Reserve forces would be for a major regional conflict.[9] Rotational use of forces, though common in the Air Force, was not part of how the Army envisioned the use of reserve components.

The first test of the Total Force Policy was the Gulf War. On 10 August 1990, Gen. Edwin H. Burba, commander of FORSCOM, ordered the deployment of the 1st Cavalry Division and the 24th Infantry Division. Both of these units were structured with National Guard "roundout" brigades. Burba chose not to activate the associated National Guard combat arms units and instead tapped active component units. In the words of a different Army leader of the same era, who spoke a common sentiment, "It is patently absurd to take relatively untrained troops when you have trained and ready troops available." However, congressional and public support ran counter to the FORSCOM commander's decision. In response, President George H. W. Bush directly mobilized the two roundout brigades on 22 August 1990.[10]

Contrary to Johnson's expectation, public sentiment for reserve component mobilizations in 1990 was overwhelmingly supportive. In fact, the Gulf War mobilizations did much to counter the Vietnam-era reputation.[11] Units were welcomed home to yellow ribbons and parades, like the 719th Transportation Company who marched home through New York City's "Canyon of Heroes."[12] The political intervention *to* mobilize the National Guard at battalion and above levels for a military engagement so short and focused surprised Army planners. Indeed, in the planning of the Total Force, planners believed it would be politicians who would refrain from mobilizing the reserve component, but in the Abrams Doctrine's first test, it was the military leadership that hesitated.[13] Though these activations were shorter and in direct response to a foreign power's aggression, the shift in public opinion signified that the Pentagon would not get the same kind of erosion of public support over reserve mobilizations as it had for the draft. With a precedent that the reserve components had been used for a small, quick war, Desert Shield/Desert Storm was the demarcation of a new understanding of how reserve forces could, and should, be used.[14]

Any difference in preparation between active component and reserve troops in Desert Storm was not stark enough to limit future mobilizations or trigger significant increases in funding or training.[15] The delays in mobilizing National Guard combat arms units for Desert Storm prompted congressional investigation, yet many of the recommendations outlined in the Government Accountability Office reports—such as increased peacetime training, interoperable personnel systems, standardized equipment between the active and reserve components, and consistent mobilization scheduling—were not instituted.[16] New training programs such as Bold Shift focused on early deploying units. The

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trouble was, as consistent rotational mobilizations became the norm in the 1990s, there were no early deploying units but, rather, a batting order.[17]

Public perception may have been a roadblock to a force structure built out of financial necessity. The "Peace Dividend" force cuts were based on an understanding that with the quick victory in Desert Storm and the end of the Cold War, the United States would not need to continue funding the military at current levels. Fundamental to that was a belief that new technology would remove the need for many personnel. Computers, in particular, represented a compelling new argument for the reduction in support forces. In combat arms, laser-guided munitions had performed spectacularly in Desert Storm, which increased confidence in this plan.[18]

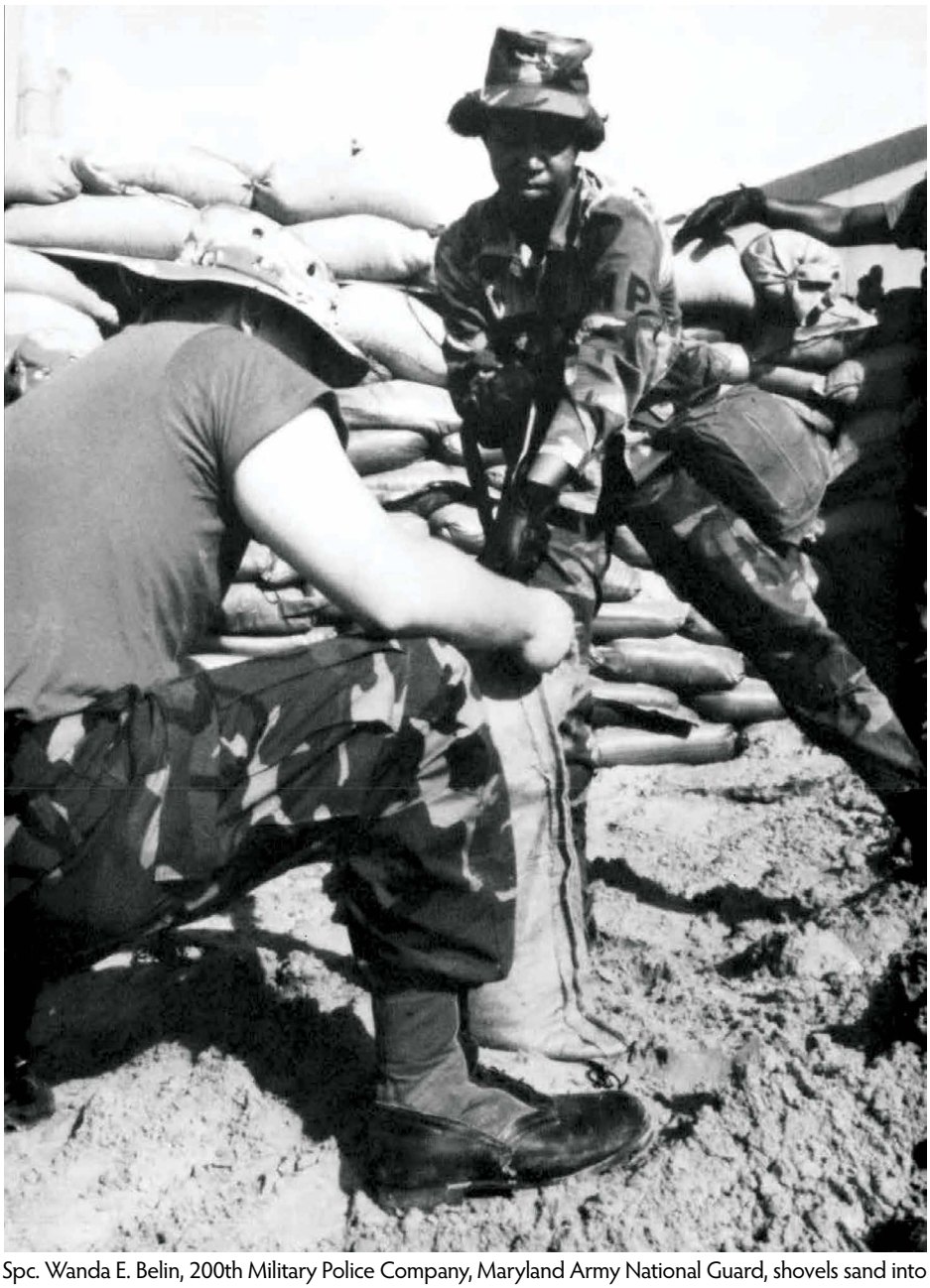
The missions the Army was tasked with, however, refused to cooperate with the new strategy of technologically based overwhelming force. From Desert Storm to 9/11, the Army was not presented with quick, regional wars with clear termination criteria. Requirements in Sinai, Kosovo, and South America were not negotiated in terms of the capabilities but in terms of supplying a specified troop contribution, which did not make allowances for efficiency.[19]

Some National Guard rotations were linked with the realities of ending the draft. As the all-volunteer force evolved, the Army could no longer plan on new draftees and had to reconsider boosting retention. Pay and quality of life became vital factors in attracting and retaining troops. The Army moved away from forward-basing units in locations like Germany and Korea, much due in part to family and quality of life concerns, and moved toward forward-deploying forces. Guard and Reserve soldiers could be deployed without their families at considerable savings. In 1995, Secretary of Defense William Perry established a Defense Science Board task force—called the Marsh Task Force—to consider "ways and means to improve Service quality of life," which found personnel tempo (PERSTEMPO), or the rate of personnel rotated into missions, was gaining traction not only as a quality of life factor but a readiness factor. The Army was learning the difficulty in using forces for a current mission while preparing for future wars or learning how to best use the new technology that rapid, decisive operations depended upon. The focus in reducing PERSTEMPO at the time was on the Air Force, which had seen their rates of units deployed away from home increase fivefold after Desert Storm. In a statement that now seems prescient, the task force stated, "[T]here was no universally accepted definition of PERSTEMPO," and that the "profile of the active force and its operating environment have changed dramatically over the past decade." There was no universally accepted definition of how often reserve component troops could be mobilized, or for how long.[20]

During the 1990s, the phrase "low density, high demand," became common around the Pentagon to describe mission sets and occupational specialties that were not represented in sufficient numbers in the force to support a reasonable PERSTEMPO. Military police, psychological operations, civil affairs, and intelligence units, just to name a few, had consistently higher PERSTEMPO rates. Reserve component units were being used to alleviate strain on active component units, and many argued that those specialized units should remain structured in the reserve forces. Even when mobilizing those reserve component units to meet part of the demand, the 1995 Marsh Task Force determined there were too few of these units. The Army was reluctant, however, to increase manning in these areas that were perceived as not contributing to a warfighting mission.[21] A 1995 Congressional Research Service paper concluded

> Post-Cold War defense drawdown and the expanding demands of manpower intensive peacekeeping and humanitarian operations … are placing at risk the decisive military edge the nation enjoys at the end of the Cold War. Many suggested fewer overseas commitments, but neither Democratic nor Republication administrations could stem demands on U.S. forces. Technological advances made transforming U.S. forces even more combat effective against conventional forces, but could not yet substitute for all the manpower needs in the nonconventional and asymmetric environments … In contrast, some have charged that the army, in particular, was resisting such "constabulary" operations and therefore managed its operations inefficiently.

As many of these units remained exclusively or primarily structured within the Guard and Reserve, the resulting increase in PERSTEMPO would be spread across the components.[22] Reserve component combat arms units were also heavily drawn



Spc. Wanda E. Belin, 200th Military Police Company, Maryland Army National Guard, shovels sand into a bag to fortify the base camp in Eastern Saudi Arabia in 1990 during Operation Desert Shield. (Photo by 1st Lt. John Goheen, U.S. Army)

upon. Increasing commitments in Bosnia forced the Army to reconsider how the Multinational Force Observer-Sinai mission in Egypt was manned and led. One experiment involved creating an 80 percent reservist battalion of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment for the Sinai mission. Not only manning, but command of MFO-Sinai shifted to reserve command in 1995, and Joint Forge in Bosnia followed the same pattern in 1997.[23]

The "Peace Dividend" Army was not structured to support rotational deployments overseas and simultaneously train for larger wars. Even in peacetime, the Guard and Reserve were required to maintain daily operations. By 1997, fifteen thousand Army reservists were deployed in over one hundred countries.[24] As these activations shaped up a few hundred or thousand soldiers at a time, it also became clear that the all-volunteer force had changed the contract between soldiers and communities.

Largely, communities did not protest when their Guard units were sent on peacekeeping missions.[25] Mobilizing a Guard or Reserve unit had not panned out to be a dramatic event that pulled communities in closer, contrary to what President Johnson had anticipated. An array of intersecting factors may have contributed to this. The Desert Shield/Desert Storm mobilizations set a precedent that units would deploy and return together, and the reasoning followed that this would connect Guard and Reserve units more closely with the communities where they served. Concurrently, however, American demographics continued to shift away from rural areas to cities and suburbs. Exacerbated by the Base Realignment and Closure process, new readiness centers were rare, and old facilities grew physically separated from where reservists lived and worked.[26] By 2014, one in four National Guard armories were considered geographically misaligned, and the median travel time for soldiers to drilling locations had grown to two hours. These shifts

indicate that as units were deploying and redeploying, they were physically detached from the communities that would politically support or resist their use.[27]

In addition to the geographic misalignment of readiness centers and armories, another concurrent trend was the slow decline of local news that would focus on stories such as local unit mobilizations. The 1990s saw the rise of cable news and the twenty-four-hour national news cycle, which in many areas triggered the start of a decline in local television news. Newspapers fared no better, as internet access grew and print newspapers declined. Coverage of reserve component mobilizations, and military mobilizations in general, declined. As a result, communities were less likely to hear about a reserve mobilization through local media.[28]

Perhaps the perceived safety of these 1990s peacekeeping missions changed the dynamic. Perhaps, with the increase in military pay and quality of life benefits since the advent of the all-volunteer force, the public conversation had changed to one where military service was not perceived as a duty of every man of a certain age, but rather that soldiers, even in reserve components, knew what they were signing up for. The rise of comment sections on news websites offers some insight on shifting public perception.[29] For instance, when the public radio show *Here and Now* ran the story "10 Years Into Afghan War, National Guard Sees Bigger Role," one strident listener commented,

> You join the Guard, or the Reserves, or the regular military, you get paid and then whine about going to war. Here's the deal you entered into a contract, live up to your obligations and quit complaining.

These 1990s deployments are shocking in how *un*-shocking they were. The Desert Storm/Desert Shield mobilizations could be compared to a pot of boiling water. After the mobilizations, the pot was turned to a simmer. Across the 1990s, the pot was slowly turned up from a simmer to a boil.[30]

The base force outlined in the Peace Dividend was too small for the kind of worldwide commitments U.S. foreign policy dictated, and judicious use of the Guard and Reserve was able to smooth out the kinks without asking for major end-strength increases.[31] Although readiness questions persisted, as the reserve component took over more rotational peacekeeping missions, it was clear that the Guard and Reserve could get the job done and allow the active component to focus on the transformation to modularity and preparation for a simmering conflict in the Middle East.[32] In recognition of their necessity, the Army National Guard was spared from most of the force cuts until 1997. The Army began to add combat training center rotations and shorten notification and mobilization timelines for reservists.[33]

Reserve component mobilizations were now business as usual.[34] However, Melvin Laird, the secretary of defense who introduced the Total Force Policy, spoke up in 2007 to state that he did not intend the reserve components to be used the way they had been in recent decades, and true political and public support must come with increases in equipment and manning.[35]

In the aftermath of September 11, some force planners were surprised as they pulled out dusty, numbered plans that listed their assigned reserve component units from the "roundout" or "wartrace" programs as unavailable because they were already deployed or recently returned.[36] A good example of this involved the shifting priorities of the MFO-Sinai mission and Afghanistan. Units of the 10th Mountain Division and 101st Airborne Division originally slated for deployment to the Sinai were quickly moved off of their scheduled rotations and mobilized for Afghanistan in 2002. They were replaced with Arkansas National Guard troops, who mobilized in half the normal time to cover the shortfall. Barely a year after their return, that same Arkansas National Guard brigade was mobilizing for Iraq, looking for replacements to cover the 856 soldiers who had just deployed.[37]

It's important to remember that the reserve component we have today is, structurally, the reserve component we had during Desert Storm. The all-volunteer force produced a concurrent trend that the average length of service increased, and more service members stayed to establish a military career.[38] Today's thirty-year veterans cut their teeth on 1990s mobilizations. In examining total operational stress to the force and equipment, it would be fair not to start the clock at 11 September 2001 but a decade earlier. The United States' relationship with Guard and Reserve mobilizations had changed from uncommon to routine, and deployments were no longer covered by national media. Due to changing demographics and aging infrastructure, reservists increasingly lived hours away from where they drilled, producing a second order effect that mobilizing a unit was not felt as strongly in each community. Meanwhile, the percentage of the population who served in the

military continued to dwindle, and military service became a less common precursor to political office.[39] The most polemical now refer to "the backdoor draft" of the Guard and Reserve, though many more will point out how the reserve components have been on a steady track of increased experience, training, and equipment since Desert Storm.[40] The initial mobilization order for reservists after 11 September authorized 50,000 service members, which, considering the 12,700 reservists already mobilized that year, was a significant increase but not a change in order of magnitude and far less than the 84,000 mobilized for Desert Storm.[41] Looking at the mobilization patterns that formed after Desert Storm, one cannot help but see that the instinct to mobilize the Guard and Reserve was not a knee-jerk reaction but a practiced muscle movement. In structuring the total force balance for the future, looking beyond the idea that everything changed on 9/11 will give planners a richer, more complex view of the operational use of the National Guard and Army Reserve. ■

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