



The Individual Ready Reserve

Reforming the Army's Hidden Legions

Garri Benjamin Hendell

REDUCTIONS OF THE end strength of the Army's active component may or may not be advisable. In the wake of the latest strategic guidance from the Defense Department, *Sustaining Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (January 2012), the looming reductions of American ground forces have been much discussed. Whatever the merits of a smaller ground force from a defense or budgetary perspective, a smaller ground force is clearly inevitable, and the priority of the defense community is to develop plans to execute America's military strategy in light of this new reality.

An agile expeditionary capability and the ability to increase the size of American ground forces in the event of a sustained commitment are the keys to success with a smaller standing Army and Marine Corps. With the Marine Corps and elements of the Army focused on the first point, it is this second point—ensuring the upward scalability of American ground forces—that requires further thought.

To begin, we must recognize the inevitability of a future conflict requiring a large ground force. Given the division of roles and responsibilities between the services, this observation primarily applies to the Army. The future need for a large land army is a question of “when,” not a question of “if.” We can decide as a matter of policy that we do not wish to engage in soldier-intensive counterinsurgency warfare, but this does not mean that we will always have the luxury of choosing when to participate in a future war. We may be drawn into a conflict, and successfully resolving that conflict may well require significant ground forces. Despite the best efforts of the State Department, all agree that future conflict is inevitable, and it will likely not come about at a time of our choosing. In the Army we like to speak of our nonnegotiable contract with America to fight and win our nation's wars. We also like to say “the enemy has a vote,” and this applies to both where and when these wars take place. We can expect the enemy to attack us not in areas where we already exercise dominance, but where we are least prepared or willing to wage sustained war: on land.

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(Photo by Army SPC Spencer Rhodes)



SSG Samuel Rivera (right) gives a class on automatic weapons to Individual Ready Reserve soldiers called to active duty to be integrated into the 1st Battalion, 124th Infantry Regiment, Camp Buehring, Kuwait, 13 April 2010.

As retired Major General Robert Scales wrote in the 5 January 2012 edition of the *Washington Post*,

Here's what the lessons of the past 70 years really teach us: We cannot pick our enemies; our enemies will pick us. They will, as they always have in the past, cede to us dominance in the air, on sea, and in space because they do not have the ability to fight us there. Our enemies have observed us closely in Iraq and Afghanistan, and they have learned the lessons taught by Mao Tse-tung, Ho Chi Minh, and Saddam Hussein: America's greatest vulnerability is dead Americans. So our future enemy will seek to fight us on the ground, where we have traditionally been poorly prepared. His objective will be to win by not losing, to kill as an end rather than as a means to an end.¹

None of this is to call into question the decision of the National Command Authority to reduce active component force structure at this time. Maintaining a large standing army in times of peace may

be undesirable for many reasons, notably cost, but the need to economize today must not prevent us from beginning to lay a cost-effective foundation for success in a future war.

A key to success lies in the realization that a reduction in Army active component end-strength translates to an inevitable increase in the size of the Army's Individual Ready Reserve (IRR). As a general matter, active component reductions lead to a cascade of talent into the Ready Reserve. While the size of the Ready Reserve should balloon in the short term to reflect the coming drawdown of the active component, its size will eventually stabilize as a proportion of the total size of the active component and Selected Reserve (SELRES). While the Ready Reserve does not completely mitigate the risks of a smaller active force, if properly managed it can be a crucial force multiplier, giving the National Command Authority increased flexibility in responding to an uncertain world.

Those soldiers cut from the active component who do not wish to participate in the Selected

Reserve (drilling Army National Guard or U.S. Army Reserve units), will end up assigned to the IRR for the duration of their statutory military service obligation (currently eight years from the day personnel are inducted into the service). If managed properly, these precious human resources (experienced soldiers, many with multiple deployments) can be effectively husbanded for two principal types of future use.

If, in a future conflict, the military surges back to force levels seen in Iraq and Afghanistan at the heights of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, individuals in the IRR can plug holes in deploying existing formations (which, for a variety of reasons, always have a certain degree of built-in “unreadiness” in their ranks and are routinely plussed-up in preparation for deployment). Experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past 10 years demonstrate that individual reservists are primarily used to fill holes in reserve component

formations, with deploying Army National Guard units being the biggest consumers of Army IRR personnel. If, on the other hand, a future conflict requires full mobilization (to a million-man army and beyond), experienced soldiers such as those in the IRR can be used to form the core cadre of a greatly expanded conscript Army, taking on increased responsibility and rank to use their much greater relative experience to lead brand-new formations. We have the capacity to train new soldiers in a relatively short period of time; what we cannot build overnight is the experience needed to lead these formations. Individual Ready Reserve soldiers have the added benefit of being able to take leadership roles in new formations without directly decrementing the readiness of existing units.

Unfortunately, the Army’s Individual Ready Reserve currently suffers from significant problems, likely linked to a shortage of resources and institutional focus. The requirement, in paragraph 4.e.(2) of Department of Defense Instruction 1235.12, is

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that “the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) will be screened, maintained, and individually prepared for activation as a pretrained manpower pool to ensure the total force is completely resourced in the event of a contingency operation, national emergency, or war.” The reality is that, when Army IRR reservists were being involuntarily mobilized to active duty for Iraq and Afghanistan, more than half of them failed to respond to their notification letters. We do not know if this was because the contact information maintained by the Army was out of date or if these soldiers simply chose not to respond. Our current national policy does not support using law enforcement assets to compel compliance with mobilization orders.

Individual Ready Reserve readiness also suffers from the reservists’ misunderstanding of their obligations and an attenuated connection between the reservist and the Army. This latter problem has been much discussed under the continuum of service initiative

advanced during Secretary Gates’ tenure; when soldiers leave active duty, they are “discharged” from the service and turn in their primary military identification (Common Access Card or CAC) instead of simply being transferred to the Ready Reserve to serve out the rest of the term as an individual reservist.

Fortunately, improving the management of the individuals in the Ready Reserve need not be expensive or complicated. It simply requires a willingness to identify existing shortcomings, an understanding of the Ready Reserve’s potential future importance, and the organizational will to commit a modest amount of time and energy to solving the problem.

Finding sufficient organizational resolve—the will to confront the problem—is the Army’s first big challenge. In an atmosphere of dwindling resources, the organization’s tendency is to cut all programs across the board. Politically speaking, the IRR doesn’t have a constituency within the Army that is willing to fight for a share of a shrinking resource

pool. In a way, this reflects the fact that the IRR isn't important to today's Army: the commanders and staffs of Army organizations, divisions, brigades, and battalions. The IRR's importance is contingent on a future, as yet unidentified contingency (albeit one that we can be confident will come about sooner or later). The IRR is a partial solution to tomorrow's force generation challenges; as such, its importance is to *tomorrow's* Army.

Technology provides a ready fix to the problem of tracking individual reservists to ensure that they are available for future mobilization. Ensuring connectivity between an organization and a mobile, geographically diverse population is a problem that today's banks, retailers, and other service organizations have largely solved by a creative use of the Internet. As long as some individual incentives exist (muster pay, PX/commissary access, etc.), getting individual reservists to log on, update their information, and perhaps show their face at a local Department of Defense (DOD) installation once a year (such as a National Guard armory, especially in areas remote from active component bases or U.S. Army Reserve centers) can be easily achieved with

a robust, usable, web-enabled data network. A continued connection between the service member and the Defense Finance and Accounting Services—the ability to continue to receive direct pay—would provide another incentive to keep the reservists' information up to date and facilitate tracking individual reservists. Social media provide additional opportunities to keep the reservist connected to the Army and develop or maintain any desire to serve in the event of future conflict.

Technology could also greatly facilitate completion of the ready reservist's annual muster requirement, which is now mostly ignored unless the reservist happens to live near one of the large-scale events periodically organized by Army Human Resources Command. A user-friendly and accessible data network would facilitate on-line completion of many, if not all, of the crucial muster activities (updating information and answering questions relating to readiness status), making an in-person appearance for height and weight validation, and other matters at a local DOD facility a relatively painless activity requiring minimal advance preparation.



SFC Alyn-Michael Macleod

MAJ Hollis Cantrell, HRC career manager, verifies an Individual Ready Reserve soldier's retirement points during an IRR Readiness Muster at the Army Reserve Center, Newtown Square, PA.

Picture this: at some time each year an individual reservist attends a muster at a nearby National Guard armory. The full-time staff checks the IRR database and confirms that he or she has already completed the on-line portion of the annual muster requirement. They validate the reservist's height, weight, and in-person attendance, triggering automatic payment of the annual muster pay through DFAS.

A user-friendly, accessible database, combined with a clearer understanding of the ready reserve obligation and the organizational resolve to maintain a more useful IRR, would arguably result in measurably improved IRR readiness and participation rates. An improved understanding by soldiers of their ready reserve obligation would involve better communication, both with new recruits when they enter the service and with those soldiers transitioning from the active component/Selected Reserve to IRR status. This would include a briefing on the opportunities for variable participation that exist for IRR soldiers (additional duty assignments, drilling for retirement points, and opportunities to take additional military training). The active component/Selected Reserve to IRR transition will have to be better managed, consistent with the reality that these soldiers are not "getting out," but simply transitioning to a different readiness category. Reservists will have to maintain a "real" military CAC ID and, with it, the ability to access military data networks and certain privileges hitherto reserved to active component and selected reserve soldiers.² Social media will reinforce the ongoing tie between the Army and the reservist and keep the reservist

apprised of the events, opportunities, and benefits of IRR service.

The current IRR affiliation program tries to affiliate individual reservists with drilling selected reserve units close to where they live to provide soldier and family support.³ This concept, championed and implemented by the U.S. Army Reserve and Army Human Resources Command in partnership with the Army National Guard, is a step in the direction of using local DOD resources to support geographically dispersed individual reservists. Unfortunately, this program simply provides an additional avenue of support for IRR soldiers and their families. It does nothing to directly support the IRR's viability as a trained manpower provider.

Additional attention (and a very modest re-allocation of existing resources) could upgrade the management and infrastructure of the IRR to allow it to mitigate some risks of a smaller active component. Effective management of personnel cut from the active duty end strength will provide a strategic "cushion" of reserve personnel to enable any necessary medium-term surge in the size of Army ground forces. Similarly, if prudently managed, ready reservists can provide a core cadre for new force structure in circumstances of total mobilization without critically decrementing the readiness of existing active component and Selected Reserve formations. The Army faces an important strategic choice in the current constrained budgetary environment. The Army should use its currently available resources and authorities to set the conditions for a successful future surge capacity. **MR**

NOTES

1. "Repeating a Mistake by Downsizing the Army Again," *Washington Post*, 5 January 2012.

2. The topic of individual reservists maintaining the common access card (CAC) was much discussed at recent Individual Ready Reserve commanders' conferences. At my last involvement, the Army systems community was very much opposed, but with the movement toward CAC-only access to many Army resources (such as a soldier's on-line personnel file) and the symbolic importance of possession of a CAC

as evidencing "real" military service, it appears that the benefits of providing a CAC to ready reservists outweigh the costs. To a soldier, it appears inconceivable that the Army could, on the one hand, attempt to keep individual reservists connected to the Army and "on the hook" for future deployments without, on the other, allowing them to maintain their CAC.

3. "Army Reserve, Army National Guard to launch IRR Affiliation Program," Army Reserve Communications press release, 1 July 2011.