

OP-ED

Keep the Reserves in the Fight

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"If we go to war again, we're taking the reserves with us." **(Note 1)**

This statement, attributed to GEN Creighton Abrams, Army Chief of Staff from October 12, 1972 to September 4, 1974, summarizes what has become known as the Abrams Doctrine. This has also been called the Laird-Abrams Doctrine, because it followed on the heels of the Total Force Policy announced in August 1970 by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird. In the three decades since GEN Abrams' tenure, the Army's reserve components -- the Army Reserve and the Army National Guard -- transformed from neglected, demoralized and left-behind forces to ready units and soldiers that are acknowledged by Defense Department and Army leaders as essential to the Army's ability to conduct operations.

Opinions vary on GEN Abrams' motives behind the doctrine that came to be associated with his name. Many have argued that his intent was to so closely integrate the Army Reserve and Army National Guard with the active Army that it would guarantee the support of the American people and their political leadership at the outset of any conflict. President Lyndon Johnson's decision to not mobilize the reserves during the Vietnam War had severe consequences militarily and at home. The Army was denied the capabilities, added strength and experience of its reserves. Many also believe that this decision eventually weakened the Army and doomed it to failure by severing the traditional linkage of the citizenry with the citizen-military in time of war. The draft notwithstanding, committing the reserves would have reflected the commitment of the American people to the war.

Others argue that GEN Abrams' motives were more geared to fiscal realities than gauging the will of the American people. To maintain or even increase the Army divisional structure that GEN Abrams envisioned in the downsized post-Vietnam Army, which was also transforming into the more expensive All-Volunteer Force, the Army would have to depend on using part-time (and thus less expensive) Army Reserve and Army National Guard units to round out active Army units.

Regardless of intent, the effects were ultimately the same. The Total Force Policy and the Abrams Doctrine contributed to the revitalization of the Army's reserve components, which had been neglected and had severely decayed during the years of American involvement in Vietnam. Army Reserve and Army National Guard soldiers were demoralized by their not being used during the Vietnam War, except in very limited fashion, and by their components becoming the refuge for those unwilling to serve in Vietnam. The policy and doctrine signaled the return of the traditional reliance on the reserve components. The reserves were assigned capabilities not needed in the active force structure but which would be needed in time of war or national emergency.

The Army Reserve and Army National Guard were counted on to deliver these capabilities when the call came. They responded to this trust; in the two decades between the promulgation of the Total Force Policy and the Persian Gulf War, the two components improved training,

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readiness, and responsiveness. When the first major test came in 1990-91, the Army called on the reserves in large numbers and they answered. Contrast the 146,000 Army Reserve and Army National Guard soldiers called up and the 102,000 deployed to Southwest Asia in 1990-1991 with the less than 20,000 Reserve and Guard soldiers called up in 1968 and the approximately 12,500 deployed to Vietnam. **(Note 2)** President George Bush authorized calling up the reserves less than three weeks after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990; it took President Johnson three years after the commitment of major combat units to Vietnam in 1965 to authorize the limited Vietnam War call-up.

Since the end of the 1991 Gulf War, both reserve components have continued to work to increase readiness and carry out even greater responsibilities. There are numerous reasons for the increased use of the reserves in the last dozen years, such as a much smaller overall military and a much more extensive commitment of American power around the globe. These additional reasons should not be overlooked; the reserves have proven, time after time, their ability to remain ready, respond swiftly and accomplish assigned missions.

Today, there are serious questions whether things have gone too far with "taking the reserves with us." Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has expressed frustration on numerous occasions about the fact that any military action that the nation must take depends on using the reserves. Did GEN Abrams intend to take the reserves to every military action, not just a war on the scale of Vietnam? That many essential capabilities are wholly or primarily contained in the reserves and require their commitment at the outset of military operations, rather than as a follow-up force, is causing particular concern.

In a July 9, 2003 memo, Secretary Rumsfeld directed the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the military services to reduce this reliance. His direction includes the elimination of the need for involuntary mobilization during the first 15 days of a rapid response operation or for any alerts to mobilize prior to an operation.

The Army Reserve and Army National Guard, in turn, recognize that major changes are needed in each organization to reflect current and emerging strategic realities. Initiatives are underway in the Army Reserve, for example, to change force structure, personnel policies, terms of service, and out-dated policies in order to create more rotational depth, improve readiness, enhance support to combatant commanders, and provide more predictability to the lives of Army Reserve soldiers.

While there is certainly room to modify the philosophy behind the Abrams Doctrine, adjust the active-reserve force and capabilities balance, and ensure that the reserves remain a viable force in reserve, a wholesale rejection of the doctrine as an overreaction to its present consequences would be a mistake. Whatever his intent, the Abrams Doctrine worked by giving the reserves relevancy. The Army and its reserve components rebuilt themselves from the broken force that emerged from Vietnam into today's Army – one of mutually complementing components, each aware of its responsibilities to the whole.

That understanding relies greatly on the self-realization by the reserves of their essential nature. Army Reserve and Army National Guard soldiers in high-demand, early-deploying units – civil affairs, psychological operations, chemical detection, military police -- understand what is expected of them and correspondingly maintain themselves in high levels of readiness in order to respond swiftly when mobilized. These units are the most frequently mentioned when over-dependence on reserve capabilities is discussed. More of these types of units are required but whether there should be more of these as active units and less as reserve units or more of

these type of reserve units and less of other types of reserve units is less clear. Internal restructuring of the Army Reserve and Army National Guard could reduce the need to call up the same specialist units repeatedly without dramatically altering the overall active-reserve balance.

While a great deal of debate continues, both within and outside of the reserves, about overuse, it was not overuse that led to the broken reserves of the Vietnam era. Rather it was disuse, of being left behind and neglected, of becoming the refuge for those unwilling to deploy that led to their decreased effectiveness.

Readjusting the active-reserve balance will require a deft hand. Moving too many of the Army's essential capabilities from the reserves back into the active Army and relegating, for the most part, only those capabilities that will be seldom, if ever, used, could well bring back the worst conditions of the Vietnam era for the Army Reserve and Army National Guard. The Army of Chief of Staff GEN Creighton Abrams' era could not count on its reserves; the Army led by the current Chief of Staff, GEN Peter Schoomaker, justifiably counts on its reserves – and does so every day.

The Abrams Doctrine should not be discarded; it worked better than its namesake could have envisioned. It helped fix a broken Army and transformed it into the present Army that magnificently continues to fight and win its nation's wars.

Note 1: When the term “reserves” or “reserve components” is used in this piece, it refers to both of the Army's reserve components: the Army Reserve and the Army National Guard.

Note 2: In 1990-91, more than 62,000 Army National Guard soldiers were called up and more than 37,000 deployed to Southwest Asia. Some 14,000 Army National Guardsmen had been called up in April 1968 and about 9,000 served in Vietnam. For the Army Reserve, 84,000 Army Reserve soldiers were called up and 65,000 deployed to Southwest Asia in 1990-1991. Less than 6,000 Army Reserve soldiers were called up in 1968 and about 3,500 deployed to Vietnam.