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The Army Reserves and the Abrams Doctrine: Unfulfilled Promise, Uncertain Future

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The Abrams Doctrine is widely interpreted as an expression of General Creighton Abrams's determination to maintain a clear linkage between the employment of the Army and the engagement of public support for military operations. Abrams, according to the doctrine, established this bond by creating a force structure that integrated Reserve¹ and Active Components so closely as to make them inextricable, ensuring after Vietnam that Presidents would never again send the Army to war without the Reserves and the commitment of the American people.

Whether Abrams actually intended to father a doctrine, or whether his efforts created a unique extra-constitutional constraint on presidential power, is open to debate. The Army rooted its force structure policies in the Total Force Concept initiated by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird. Attempting to address the imbalance between budgets and strategy, Laird saw the Total Force as a means to provide sufficient troops for the nation's security needs without the costly burden of maintaining a large standing army.

Furthermore, while Laird's new defense policies and Abrams's initiatives proved adequate for maintaining a large standing force, they were never equal to the task of sustaining readiness and modernization. In fact, implementing the Total Force Concept contributed to chronic unpreparedness in the Army's Reserve Components.

The failures of Total Force policies and disputed interpretations of Abrams's plans for the Army's future should be of more than passing historical interest. The

Talking Points

- The Abrams Doctrine is widely interpreted as an expression of General Creighton Abrams's determination to maintain a clear linkage between the employment of the Army and the engagement of public support for military operations.
- Abrams's initiatives were never equal to the task of sustaining readiness and modernization. In fact, they contributed to chronic unpreparedness in the Army's Reserve Components.
- There are good reasons for investing in the Reserves rather than returning to conscription or expanding the Active Army, but they are practical matters that have little to do with sustaining the Abrams Doctrine.
- Reserve Component policies and programs must be revamped and resourced to increase the capacity of citizen soldiers to respond rapidly to the wide range of emerging missions.

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current strains on the Reserve Components can be traced directly to an over-reliance on policies justified under the Total Force. It would be a mistake to try to build the Army of the 21st century on the misunderstood and flawed precedents of the past.

Origins of Total Force Concept

The genesis of the Total Force lay in President Richard Nixon's 1968 election-year promise to end the draft.² In the wake of the North Vietnamese Tet Offensive and declining popular support for the war, promising to end conscription, Nixon reasoned, would remove a ready target for antiwar protestors and congressional opposition.³

Shortly after taking office, Secretary Laird recommended that Nixon appoint a commission to determine the most practical means for abolishing the draft while ensuring the United States could still meet its defense commitments.⁴ The commission, established by Nixon on March 27, 1969, and chaired by former Eisenhower Defense Secretary Thomas S. Gates, Jr., concluded that an "all-volunteer force" could serve as a practical alternative to conscription. Delivered on February 6, 1970, the Gates report served as the basis for subsequent reforms.

From the outset, Laird knew that the all-volunteer force would require substantial Reserve Com-

ponents. The additional costs of recruiting and retaining volunteers and the simultaneous pressure to reduce defense spending made reliance on Reserves a virtual prerequisite. Unless mobilized, Reserves cost only a fraction of the expense of maintaining Active forces.⁵ The Gates Commission assumed that Reserve units would comprise a major part of the force structure.⁶

In August 1970, Laird directed the services to achieve "economies" by "increased reliance on the combat and combat support units of the Guard and Reserve. Emphasis will be given," he wrote, "to the concurrent consideration of the Total Forces, Active and Reserve.... A total force concept will be applied to all aspects of planning, programming, manning, equipping and employing National Guard and Reserve Forces."⁷ The cost savings achieved by maintaining Reserve force structure would allow the Pentagon to put many more troops in the field if the need for a large-scale mobilization arose.

In August 1972, Laird reported to Congress that the Pentagon's goal was a volunteer force of "2.3 million Active Duty and 1 million Selected Reserve Members."⁸ Indeed, even before Abrams reported to the Pentagon, all the force structure options under consideration by the Army for the all-volunteer military looked to having the Reserves com-

1. The Reserve Component represents 47 percent of the nation's available military forces and consumes approximately 8.3 percent of the annual national defense budget. It consists of the Army and Air National Guard and the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force Reserves, totaling over 1,200,000 men and women. Discussion of Reserves in this paper, unless noted otherwise, refers to the Army's Reserve Components, the Army Reserve and Army National Guard. Reserve Components are structured, equipped, mobilized, and employed sufficiently differently by each of the services that it would be incorrect to generalize the findings in this paper to include the other services.
2. Congress legislated conscription first during the Civil War, and again during World War I and II. Reinstated in 1948, the draft continued in effect through the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Nixon suspended conscription in 1973.
3. For a contemporary discussion of the politics surrounding Nixon's decision, see Congressional Quarterly, *U.S. Draft Policy and Its Impact* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Service, 1968), pp. 7-9, 25-32.
4. Gus C. Lee and Geoffrey Y. Parker, *Ending the Draft—The Story of the All Volunteer Force, Final Report 77-1* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, April 1977), p. 37.
5. Congressional Budget Office, "Structuring U.S. Forces After the Cold War: Costs and Effects of Increased Reliance on the Reserves," September 1992, p. 7.
6. John R. Brinkerhoff and David W. Grissmer, "The Reserve Forces in an All-Volunteer Environment," in William Bowman, Roger Little, and G. Thomas Sicilia, eds., *The All-Volunteer Force After a Decade: Retrospect and Prospect* (Washington, D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1985), p. 209.
7. Secretary of Defense, "Memorandum to the Secretaries of the Military Departments," August 21, 1970.

prise one-third to half of the force.⁹ Laird's decisions on the structure of the all-volunteer force virtually ensured that, in the future, any large-scale or protracted operation would require some mix of Active and Reserve troops.

When General Creighton Abrams became Army Chief of Staff on October 16, 1972, plans were already underway to reduce the post-Vietnam Active Army to 825,000 and 13 divisions—inadequate, the chief concluded, to provide a sufficient conventional force to meet the Soviet threat. Laird's successor as Secretary of Defense, James R. Schlesinger, agreed to allow Abrams to increase the size of the Army to 16 Active divisions, the number the service had before the Vietnam build-up in 1964, as long as the general did not require additional manpower or resources.¹⁰

Growing to 16 divisions without heavy reliance on the Reserve Components was simply unaffordable. Abrams reduced each Active division to two brigades and assigned a Reserve Component brigade and substantial support forces to “round out” the 16-division force structure. Abrams's decision fit well within existing Defense Department Total Force policies.¹¹

The Abrams Doctrine

Proponents of the Abrams Doctrine contend that dependence on Reserve Components serves as an extra-constitutional tripwire on the presidential use of military power.¹² Reservists were “citizen soldiers” (unless mobilized, the majority don uniforms only one weekend per month and two weeks in the

summer for periodic training), and they would provide a strong bond between the military and civil society. Any large-scale mobilization of Reserves would affect communities throughout the country and engage the American people.

Whether this reasoning animated the Total Force Concept or Abrams's decision to implement the 16-division force is highly contentious. When the Gates Commission reported back to Nixon, their findings contained no discussion of the impact any changes might have on the President's ability to employ military forces or sustain popular support for combat operations. In fact, they felt compelled to address often-expressed concerns that an all-volunteer force of Active and Reserve troops would be *less, not more* connected to the American people. The commission argued that there would be little difference between the fundamental civil character of an all-volunteer military and the conscription army. The new military would not become “further isolated from society.”¹³ They argued that troops would continually rotate through the all-volunteer force, both Active and Reserve, and that this would maintain the character of a citizen army.

The notion that Abrams believed force structures should be rigged to provide a restraint on the presidential power is more of an open question. Abrams died in 1974 and never formally articulated a specific doctrine. Interviews with senior officers who worked with the general suggest that Abrams's decision did have a political component.¹⁴ On the other hand, a research paper by Abrams's son, a major

8. Secretary of Defense, *Report of the Secretary of Defense to the Chairman of the Armed Services Committees: Progress in Ending the Draft and Achieving the All Volunteer Force*, August 1972, p. iii.

9. Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Department of the Army, “Provide: Project Volunteer in Defense of the Nation,” Vol. 1, Executive Summary (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, [1970]), p. 10.

10. Lewis Sorley, *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Time* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 363.

11. Michael Doubler, *Civilian in Peace, Soldier in War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2003), pp. 279–283.

12. The term “Abrams Doctrine” is commonly used in official Department of Defense publications. See, for example, Reserve Forces Policy Board, *The Annual Report of the Reserve Forces Policy Board Fiscal Year 2002* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, June 25, 2003), p. 12.

13. Study, *Achieving America's Goals: National Service or the All-Volunteer Armed Force?*, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, February 1977, p. 44.

14. See, for example, Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, p. 364.

attending the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth in 1975, argues that the decision was based on force structure needs. Major Abrams makes no mention of an Abrams doctrine.¹⁵ Schlesinger, who worked closely with the Chief of Staff on the decision to create the 16-division force, dismissed the idea. “That would not really be like Abe,” he concluded.¹⁶

Schlesinger’s skepticism is understandable. Abrams hailed from a generation of brother officers whose beliefs regarding civil–military relations Samuel Huntington described in his seminal work, *The Soldier and the State*. Abrams’s generation deeply believed that civil dominance over the military was maintained, as historian Eliot Cohen summarized, by “carving off for it a sphere of action independent of politics.”¹⁷

Under the “normal” theory of civil control, a sharp division is maintained between political decisions and military operations. The military sustained its belief in this paradigm after Vietnam.¹⁸ Officers saw Vietnam failures in classic “Huntingtonian” terms. “The nation went to war,” wrote H. R. McMaster, a young Army officer who in 1997 penned a scathing critique of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “without the benefit of effective military advice from . . . the nation’s ‘principal military advisors.’”¹⁹

The prescription for addressing political intrusion into the military sphere also remained consistent. When political leaders transgressed into

decisions that properly belonged to soldiers, the generals’ options were to protest or resign, not cross over into the realm of politics. Creating force structures intended to skew political decisions seems to be at odds with the military’s traditional conception of professionalism.

Likewise, because military officers were, by nature, realists and conservative,²⁰ the notion that Abrams would create force structures for political causes rather than utilitarian reasons cut against the grain of the contemporary military mind. In fact, all the arguments made by the Army staff for increasing the number of divisions were coached in utilitarian military terms.²¹

Also questionable is whether Abrams’s insistence that the “Army should not go to war without the involvement and tacit approval of the American people”²² should be linked to his decision to integrate Reserve and Active force structures. During the Vietnam War, President Lyndon Johnson largely refrained from mobilizing the National Guard.²³ Abrams strongly felt that the Reserve Components should be employed in major military operations and that not calling them up for Vietnam was a mistake. Most senior military leaders agreed. One survey of Army general officers who commanded in Vietnam found that 90 percent disapproved of the decision not to fully utilize the Reserves.²⁴ Their objections were largely on practical grounds. Former Lieutenant General Alexander M. Weyand, for example, reflecting on the lessons of Vietnam, wrote:

15. Creighton W. Abrams, Jr., “The Sixteen Division Force, Anatomy of a Decision” (Fort Leavenworth, Kan.: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1975), *passim*.

16. Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, p. 364. While Sorley argues that the desire to link Reserve and Active duty forces in the political decision to deploy U.S. forces animated Abrams’s thinking, he does not claim that this constituted a formal “Abrams Doctrine.” See also Conrad C. Crane, *Avoiding Vietnam: The U.S. Army’s Response to Defeat in Southeast Asia* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, 2002), footnotes 11, 12.

17. Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldier, Statesman, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002), p. 227.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 229.

19. H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), pp. 324–325.

20. Samuel P. Huntington, “Power, Expertise, and the Military Profession,” *Daedalus*, Fall 1963, pp. 785–786.

21. Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans–Requirements Directorate, memorandum, “Why a 16-Division Force,” September 27, 1974, 16-Div Force file, DAMH–HSO.

22. Robert H. Scales, *Certain Victory* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey’s, 1993), p. 18.

[The] Decision not to call up the Reserves placed even greater reliance on the Draft, resulting in an individual replacement system which eroded unit cohesion. The one year rotation policy further hurt unit cohesion and continuity of command. Draw down of personnel from Europe created a paper army there and eventually in the U.S.²⁵

Deploying the Reserves would have been a more efficient and effective means for mobilizing military manpower, preventing many of the shortfalls of the Vietnam-era Army.

Postwar critics of the Vietnam strategy such as Harry Summers broadened concerns over the structure of U.S. forces. Summers asserted that the conflict reflected an increasingly disturbing trend. In *On Strategy*, a treatise first published in 1981 for students at the Army War College, Summers argued that before World War II, Presidents could not undertake major military operations without engaging the support of the American people because the United States maintained a small standing army and would have to mobilize the citizenry before going to war. The large Cold War militaries, on the other hand, allowed Presidents to resort to arms before engaging public support.²⁶ Summers attributed failure in Vietnam to the loss of American will. Obtaining and maintaining broad popular support was an essential component of a winning strategy.

Summers, however, does not mention the Abrams Doctrine, nor does he address the advantages of Reserves over conscription as a means for linking military commitments to the will of the people. This would be a remarkable omission if the doctrine was as essential as its proponents later claimed. Over the ensuing decade, Total Force policies, the 16-division force decision, and the issue of engaging public support were frequently linked and conflated into a single rationale for Abrams's thinking.²⁷ In 1992, Summers jumped on the bandwagon. His analysis of strategy in the 1991 Gulf War hailed the Abrams Doctrine for requiring President Bush to arouse the public before committing troops to battle.²⁸

Indeed, studies of decisions to use force from Vietnam to Desert Storm suggest that Presidents took Summers's caution in *On Strategy* to heart.²⁹ For example, in a speech delivered on November 28, 1984, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger enunciated criteria for the use of military force. One of the six points held that "Before the United States commits combat forces abroad, there must be some reasonable assurance we will have the support of the American people and their elected representatives in Congress."³⁰ Such sentiments, however, rather than the structure of U.S. military forces, may well account for the character of presidential decisions.

Furthermore, in the intervening years between the Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq, Presidents

23. Johnson's decision not to mobilize Reserves has been credited to (1) the belief that managing draft quotas would be a more cost-effective way to adjust military end-strength; (2) wanting to avoid the impression that Reserve "mobilization" might be interpreted by other countries as an expansion of the conflict beyond the United States' stated limited war aims; and (3) wanting to avoid a congressional debate that might allow political opponents to undercut Johnson's domestic programs. Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), pp. 260–285; William F. Levantrosser, *Congress and the Citizen-Soldier* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1967), p. 226.

24. See Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers*, 3d. ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), p. 117.

25. Alexander M. Weyand, "Vietnam: Lessons Learned," January 7, 2004, unpublished paper.

26. Harry G. Summers, *On War: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Cal.: Presidio Press, 1982), pp. 13–14.

27. See, for example, John Whiteclay Chambers III, *To Raise an Army: The Draft Comes to Modern America* (New York: Free Press, 1987), p. 273.

28. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy II: A Critical Analysis of the Gulf War* (New York: Dell, 1992), pp. 72–74.

29. See, for example, Jeffrey Record, *Perils of Reasoning by Historical Analogy: Munich, Vietnam, and American Use of Force Since 1945* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air University, 1998), pp. 11–14.

have employed substantial Reserve forces without engendering either significant debate in Congress or public concern, again suggesting that the commitment of Reserves is not a critical threshold for presidential decision-making.³¹ One analysis of recent commitments of military force found that “the belief that activating the Reserve Component ensures the support of the people may be nothing more than a well-propagated myth.”³² This argument holds that the nature and exercise of political leadership and consensus among national leaders, rather than the manner and form of military commitments, determines a President’s real freedom of action in deploying and sustaining forces in the field.

Additionally, Summers’s contention that the “large standing armies” of the early Cold War years allowed Presidents greater freedom of action than their predecessors lacks merit. While it is true that the post–World War II peacetime standing armies were larger than their predecessors, in comparison to the growing size of the U.S. population and the increasing national security commitments of the nation over the second half of the 20th century, the size of the American peacetime standing army was still relatively modest. Major military commitments still required additional manpower—either from conscription or from the Reserves.³³

It is also not clear that one form of mustering manpower makes an inherently better link to the

American people than the other. The proponents of the Abrams Doctrine argue that liberally employing citizen soldiers would quickly cause the American people to reject or validate the use of force.³⁴ But the presumption that Reserves make a stronger bond than other segments of American society is highly debatable. One complaint over the decision to create an all-volunteer force argued that it would create a more professional, subservient military that could be employed without regard to public opinion.³⁵

Indeed, critics of current operations in Iraq (which have been heavily reliant on the Reserves) argue for a return to conscription. Ironically, their argument is exactly the same as that of proponents of the Abrams Doctrine: A draft, they contend, would be more reflective of society, a more substantial link to the people, and serve as a better check on presidential decision-making.³⁶

Scholars continue to debate whether the gap between civilian society and the military has been growing since World War II and whether the creation of the all-volunteer force has made any substantive difference.³⁷ At best, perhaps, the shift from conscription to the Total Force reflects more continuity than change in American culture. America’s customary approach to civil–military relations calls for one solution or the other, volunteers or conscription. U.S. traditions derive from the 17th century British “anti-standing army ideology”³⁸ that held that the mainte-

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30. David T. Twining, “The Weinberger Doctrine and the Use of Force in the Contemporary Era,” in Alan Ned Sabrosky and Robert L. Sloane, eds., *The Recourse to War: An Appraisal of the Weinberger Doctrine* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1988), pp. 11–13.
31. As a case in point, see Stephen Duncan’s discussion of President Bill Clinton’s decision to send troops to Haiti in 1994 in Stephen Duncan, “Citizen Sailors and Soldiers: Designing the New Total Force,” paper presented to the Conference on Bridging the Gap: Reserve Forces and Their Role in Society, Calgary, Canada, March 21–24, 2002, at www.stratnet.ucalgary.ca/events/past/conference/reserves/presentations/Duncan.pdf.
32. Brian D. Jones, “The Abrams Doctrine: Total Force or Enduring Fallacy?” U.S. Army War College *Strategy Research Paper*, February 19, 2004, p. 8.
33. For a discussion on the continuities in the structure of American military power during the periods before and after World War II, see Aaron L. Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: America’s Anti-Statism and Its Cold War Grand Strategy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), *passim*.
34. James Burk, “The Military Obligations of Citizens Since Vietnam,” *Parameters*, Summer 2001, p. 54.
35. Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year that Rocked the World* (New York: Ballantine, 2004), p. 374.
36. See, for example, Charles Rangel, “War’s Burden Must be Shared,” January 7, 2003, at www.house.gov/apps/list/hearing/ny15_rangel/sharesacrifice010703.html.

nance of democracy required land forces composed of citizen soldiers.

In the U.S. tradition, the “standing army” would constitute the minimum needed to address security needs. These forces were to be supplemented by the citizenry in times of national crisis. In U.S. history, conscription was never considered the preferred means to reinforce the professional army. In fact, in the 18th and 19th centuries, drafts were thought appropriate only under the direst circumstances. Peacetime conscription was considered an instrument of militarism and authoritarianism. Reliance on the colonial, and later the state, militias (and their descendants, the Army Reserve and National Guard) was the preferred method of supplementing manpower.³⁹

Even at the outbreak of the Cold War, Congress rejected mandatory Universal Military Training and Service for all young American males in favor of what was thought to be a temporary lesser evil—a mixed Active and Reserve force supplemented by a two-year draft.⁴⁰ The shift to the post-Vietnam Total Force reflected a return to a “normal” structure for the military, but not necessarily one that limited presidential authority in a more extraordinary manner.

Ongoing operations in Iraq have brought the efficacy of the Abrams Doctrine under further scrutiny. Proponents of the doctrine acknowledge that the massive deployments of Reserve forces have not been matched by the mobilization of the nation as a whole. The Abrams Doctrine, they concede, has not proven a sufficient trigger to connect the nation to the conflict.

“The American people are not engaged,” lamented Albert C. Zapanta, chairman of the Pentagon’s Reserve Forces Policy Board.⁴¹ Zapanta argues that during World Wars I and II, Presidents fired the will of the American people by waging a total conflict, including mobilizing the home front through propaganda, volunteer campaigns, and the promotion of sacrifice and public service. The lack of similar policies during the global war on terrorism, he suggests, undercuts the likelihood that popular support can be sustained.

Part of the problem is that there is no national consensus as to what constitutes the legitimate use of the Reserve Components. For example, writing a month before the September 11 attacks, Major General John Groves, the Adjutant General of Kentucky, wrote that a basic tenet of the Abrams Doctrine was that “U.S. reserve component forces were to be utilized only for the ‘big one.’ This was confirmed by the very low number of reserve forces deployed in the post-Vietnam period. Cold War roles for reserve forces were developed accordingly.”⁴²

Groves’s assessment, however, directly contrasted with joint doctrine, which envisions mobilization as a “graduated response process,” providing increasing levels of Reserve forces for reacting to a range of crises and wars.⁴³ These differing perspectives reflect the lack of agreement, even within the ranks of the military, over whether the Reserves should be a ready pool of troops to be drawn on for meeting any national security needs or be treated as the “force of last resort,” to be used only when the survival of the nation was threatened.

37. Lindsay Cohn, “The Evolution of the Civil–Military ‘Gap’ Debate,” paper prepared for the Project on the Gap Between the Military and American Society, Triangle Institute for Security Studies, 1999, at www.poli.duke.edu/civmil/cohn_literature_review.pdf.

38. Lois Schwoerer, “No Standing Armies!” *The AntiArmy Ideology in Seventeenth Century England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

39. Chambers, *To Raise an Army: The Draft Comes to Modern America*, pp. 9–11.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 270.

41. Conversation with the author, Center for the Study of the Presidency, Washington, D.C., January 14, 2005.

42. John R. Groves, “Crossroads in U.S. Military Capability: The 21st Century U.S. Army and the Abrams Doctrine,” *Association of the United States Army, Land Warfare Papers* No. 37, August 2001, pp. 2–3.

43. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine for Mobilization Planning*, Joint Pub. 4–05, June 22, 1995, p. vii.

Ambiguity over the purpose of the Reserves, and the reality that any large-scale or protracted military campaign will have a dramatic rippling effect on the lives of the families, friends, neighbors, and coworkers of citizen soldiers, opens the door for claims that the use of the Reserves is overly disruptive and disproportionately unfair. As a result, political opposition to the employment of citizen soldiers may not, as the Abrams Doctrine intends, reflect a sober rejection by the people of the justness of the cause and the wisdom of their leaders, but rather the backlash of Americans who feel the Pentagon is just taking advantage of the Reserves. For example, it is not clear whether the concerns in local communities and among some Reservists over mobilization policies reflect “popular will” against the commitment of American forces in Iraq or the inefficiencies and inequities in how the Reserves are being treated.⁴⁴

The Total Force Concept in Action

While their decisions might not have altered presidential power, the vision of leaders like Laird and Abrams did ensure that the military would have sufficient force structure to address its various defense tasks. They also ensured, according to military doctrine, that “mobilization actions will be considered for most military operations.”⁴⁵ On the other hand, they proved largely a failure at maintaining adequate readiness. The inability to sustain

fully trained and ready Army Reserve Components undercut their value both as a military instrument and as an effective link to the nation.

Total Force policies proved no match for the meager defense budgets of the post-Vietnam years. The Army of the 1970s was a “hollow force” with inadequate troops, training, and equipment.⁴⁶ In 1978, Army Chief of Staff Edward C. “Shy” Meyer told President Jimmy Carter that only four of the service’s 16 divisions stood ready for battle.⁴⁷

The Reserves were far worse off than the Active force. A 1975 Defense Department study concluded that the expectations of the Total Force Concept “may have been overstated” and that mobilization plans were “not realistic.”⁴⁸ Reserve recruiting plummeted after conscription ended, becoming a “serious problem.”⁴⁹ In 1980, Laird, the father of the Total Force, decried the state of military readiness, particularly the Reserves, concluding it was “virtually impossible for the ground forces to sustain a conventional war in Europe.”⁵⁰

Indeed, the Army had little confidence in the Reserves. The Army’s doctrinal capstone manual FM 100–5 made it an imperative to “win the first battle of the next war,” assuming the most decisive combat operations would be conducted before large-scale mobilization of the Reserves.⁵¹ In practice, under the first decade of the Total Force Concept, the Reserves became less ready and less likely to be

44. Katherine McIntire Peters, “Stretched Thin,” *Government Executive*, October 1, 2003, at www.govexec.com/features/0903hs/HS0903s6.htm.

45. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine for Mobilization Planning*, p. viii.

46. In 1980, Army Chief of Staff General Edward C. Meyer used the term “hollow Army” in congressional testimony to describe the shortage of soldiers available to fill the service’s field units. The term is now widely used to characterize shortages of personnel, training, and equipment that significantly impinge on military readiness. See Department of Defense, *CJSC Guide to the Chairman’s Readiness System*, September 1, 2000, p. 3. See also Department of the Army, *Historical Summary FY 1989*, updated May 19, 2003, p. 4, at www.army.mil/cmh-pg/books/DAHSUM/1989/CH1.htm.

47. Conversation with the author, Center for the Study of the Presidency, Washington, D.C., January 14, 2005.

48. Defense Manpower Commission, *Defense Manpower: The Keystone of National Security*, April 1976, p. 98.

49. Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Manpower, Reserve Affairs, and Logistics, *America’s Volunteers: A Report on the All-Volunteer Armed Forces*, December 31, 1978, p. 5.

50. Melvin R. Laird, *People, Not Hardware—The Highest Defense Priority* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1980), p. 6.

51. John L. Romjue, *From Active Defense to Airland Battle: The Development of Army Doctrine 1973–1982* (Fort Monroe, Va.: United States Army Training and Doctrine Command, June 1984), p. 15.

called on for the initial employment of force, making them a poorer, not better, link to the nation.

Beginning in 1979, the Army also looked to develop rapid reaction forces and light divisions which could be quickly dispatched to troubled spots around the world. These forces were primarily to be Active duty units, providing the President the means to rapidly commit U.S. forces to action with only minimal initial deployment of the Reserves.⁵² These developments appeared to be clearly at odds with the stated intent of the Abrams Doctrine and the likelihood that Reserves would be among the first into battle.

Substantial increases in defense spending during the 1980s resulted in dramatic improvements in end strength and readiness in the Active force, but only marginal increases in the Reserve Component ranks.⁵³ Three principles that evolved to support the Total Force Concept ensured that most additional resources would be captured by the Active Army while not addressing the chronic underfunding of the Reserve forces in a holistic manner.⁵⁴

- **“Mirror Imaging”** called for keeping the same kinds of combat units in both the Active force and the National Guard (i.e., armored brigades and divisions). This principle held that the Guard would be a more equal and relevant partner if it had a similar force structure. Thus, the Guard retained large, expensive, and complex heavy combat forces, though it lacked the time and resources to maintain their readiness or mobilize and deploy them efficiently.
- **“First to Fight Funding”** held that units that were likely to see combat first should have all the financial resources they needed to be fully armed, trained, and manned. The remaining

forces, primarily in the Reserve Components, received minimal funding for maintenance of equipment and individual and crew training. This resulted in steeply tiered readiness, with many Reserve units being unready for deployment with significant post-mobilization training and equipping.

- **“Cascading Modernization”** called for Reserves to receive equipment from Active forces after the Active units had been modernized. Saddled with older and worn equipment, the Reserves would face higher maintenance costs, suffer less equipment availability, and have less capability than the Active forces.

A 1982 memorandum issued by Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger did much to codify these policies. Weinberger’s memorandum did state that, henceforth, “units that fight first [would] be equipped first regardless of component,” but since war plans overwhelmingly committed Active duty forces ahead of all but a handful of Reserve units, this policy ensured that the lion’s share of resources would go to the Active Component.⁵⁵

Total Force policies and the Abrams Doctrine did aid in garnering significant additional resources for “early-deploying” Reserve units, such as the round-out brigades, and maintaining a robust Reserve Component force structure. On the other hand, they contributed to chronic unpreparedness, justifying policies that sustained inefficient force structures, poor and insufficient equipment, and inadequate programs for efficiently mobilizing and deploying Reserve forces.

Reserve Component leaders largely accepted Total Force policies and trumpeted the significance of the Abrams Doctrine because they justi-

52. John B. Wilson, *Maneuver and Firepower: The Evolution of Divisions and Separate Brigades* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1998), pp. 390–391.

53. For example, the principal gains in the National Guard during the Reagan-era buildup were in force-level manning and the readiness of units associated with the round-out program. Doubler, *Civilian in Peace, Soldier in War*, pp. 289–291, 293–294.

54. James Jay Carafano, “Citizen Soldiers and Homeland Security: A Strategic Assessment,” Lexington Institute, March 2004, p. 18.

55. Caspar Weinberger, Memorandum to the Military Services, “Priorities for Equipment Procurement and Distribution,” June 21, 1982.

fied their missions and the importance of the Reserves, ensured a modicum of resources, and provided a ready justification to defend the size and composition of Reserve forces. These arguments, for example, were used to fend off force-structure cuts directed by the 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review. National Guard leaders objected to the directive cutting 67,000 Reserve troops.⁵⁶ Complaints that these reductions would have endangered the Abrams Doctrine provided the backdrop for their opposition.⁵⁷

Total Force in the 21st Century

As long as citizen soldiers were never subjected to large-scale and sustained deployments, the wisdom of the uneasy compromise between Reserve leaders and the Pentagon remained untested. All that changed on one warm morning in September 2001. In response to the global war on terrorism, Reserves have been called to serve in numbers unprecedented since World War II. The U.S. Army simply could not conduct its missions worldwide without the contributions of its Reserve Components.

The accomplishments of the Reserves certainly validate the underlying premise of the Total Force Concept. For example, in the period from September 11, 2001, to the end of 2003, over 319,000 citizen soldiers—27 percent of the Reserve Components—performed active duty.⁵⁸ The Total Force has proven itself an effective means to rapidly expand military capacity to meet changing national security requirements.

On the other hand, stresses on the Reserves also reflect the lack of adequate investment in the

Total Force. The National Guard alone has had to transfer over 74,000 individuals from one command to another just to fill the ranks of units with sufficient trained and qualified personnel before they deployed. Equipment shortfalls are also significant. Since 9/11, the Army has transferred over 35,000 pieces of equipment from non-deploying units to forces in Iraq, leaving the stay-behind commands lacking more than a third of their critical equipment.⁵⁹

The U.S. Government Accountability Office concluded flatly that the Army lacked the means to mobilize and demobilize forces effectively.⁶⁰ Reserve commands, in practice, are cannibalizing the force to meet short-term deployment needs. These shortfalls reflect years of chronic underfunding and the lack of effective personnel policies for managing, training, sustaining, mobilizing, deploying, and reconstituting Reserve forces.

Sustaining a large and capable Reserve Component in the years ahead will require significant investments. For example, recruiting efforts will have to be increased, pre-mobilization training and medical and dental readiness improved, and pay and benefits enhanced.⁶¹ The current mobilization process also has to be scrapped and restructured. “To ensure judicious and prudent use of Reserve components and to reach a high level of efficiency and effectiveness,” testified Albert Zapanta, “significant improvements to the mobilization process will require changes in policy, law, and doctrine.”⁶² Virtually every aspect of Reserve personnel policies must be rethought.

Reserve Component equipment will also require substantial attention. “Absent a concerted effort to

56. Doubler, *Civilian in Peace, Soldier in War*, p. 365.

57. Groves, “Crossroads in U.S. Military Capability: The 21st Century U.S. Army and the Abrams Doctrine,” pp. 4–5.

58. Albert C. Zapanta, testimony before the Subcommittee on Total Force, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, March 31, 2004, p. 2.

59. U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Reserve Forces: Actions Needed to Better Prepare the National Guard for Future Overseas and Domestic Missions*, GAO-05-21, November 10, 2004, p. 3.

60. U.S. Government Accountability Office, *DOD Needs to Address Long-Term Reserve Force Availability and Related Mobilization and Demobilization Issues*, GAO-04-1031, September 2004, p. 5.

61. Zapanta testimony, March 31, 2004, pp. 6–7, 8, 11–12.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

fully resource modernization and recapitalization,” the 2003 report of the Reserve Forces Policy Board concluded, “unit equipment will continue to age and become obsolete.... Over the next ten years, without a change of equipment policies aging RC equipment inventories will increase substantially.”⁶³ The additional wear and tear on equipment as a result of deployments supporting the global war on terrorism has only made the need for substantial investments more of an imperative.⁶⁴

Additionally, units must be restructured and the size of the force increased to meet the needs of anticipated future missions. In particular, Reserve Component forces should be developed that are better suited to the tasks of the 21st century, supporting homeland security activities, theater support operations, and post-conflict missions.⁶⁵

These are investments worth making, but achieving them will require the Pentagon to think differently about how it maintains its Reserve Components, as well as robust defense budgets adequate to meet the needs of both the Active and Reserve forces. The Reserves will have to be moved to the heart of the Department of Defense’s transformation efforts rather than relegated to the periphery.

The alternatives for increasing the capacity of the future force are not promising. A draft is impractical.⁶⁶ Pentagon proposals to reduce reliance on the Reserves by “rebalancing the force” and shifting units to the Active Component seem equally wrongheaded.⁶⁷ Building additional capacity in the Active force would be extraordinarily expensive, exacerbating the challenge of maintaining adequate manpower, modernizing units, and paying for ongoing operations without return-

ing to the hollow force of the 1970s. The Pentagon’s best option is preparing the Reserves for the missions of the 21st century.

The Future of the Abrams Doctrine

There are good reasons for investing in the Reserves rather than returning to conscription or expanding the Active Army, but they are practical matters that have little to do with sustaining the Abrams Doctrine. Additionally, the future course of military developments suggests that the doctrine’s utility for defining the link between the nation and the service will only diminish over time.

- The size of the total Army in relation to the population as a whole will likely continue to decrease in the years ahead as the U.S. population grows and technology is increasingly employed as a substitute for manpower.
- Distinctions between the Active and Reserve forces will likely decline. During the Cold War, significant portions of the Active Component were based overseas. Additionally, most soldiers were not married. The spouses of married soldiers were not employed. In the future, most Active duty soldiers will be based inside the United States. They will be married, and their spouses will likely be employed in the civilian sector. As a result, in the future, the ties of the Active force to local communities may be nearly as substantial as those of the Reserves. At the same time, Defense policies will increasingly emphasize a “continuum of service,”⁶⁸ allowing Active and Reserve troops to move more easily over the course of their career from one component to the other, blurring the distinction between them.

63. Reserve Forces Policy Board, *The Annual Report of the Reserve Forces Policy Board* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2003), p. 10.

64. Bette R. Sayre, ed., *National Guard and Reserve Equipment Report for Fiscal Year 2004* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, February 2003), p. 1-1.

65. Carafano, “Citizen Soldiers and Homeland Security: A Strategic Assessment,” pp. 19–21.

66. Office of the Undersecretary of Defense, Personnel and Readiness, “Conscription Could Threaten Hard-Won Achievements and Military Readiness,” January 9, 2003.

67. Carafano, “Citizen Soldiers and Homeland Security: A Strategic Assessment,” p. 15.

68. *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

- Civilian workers and private contractors will increasingly supply a greater portion of American military might. In the near future, the private sector rather than the Reserves might become the more significant reservoir of additional military capacity and a more important link to the American people. Indeed, as the economy becomes increasingly international, the decision of a U.S. President to commit troops may commit the global economy as well.
Simply put, the changing character of military forces may make the justification for the Abrams Doctrine irrelevant. As the Army evolves, the notion that the Reserves could be used as an extra-constitutional restraint on presidential power could well be seen as an increasingly unrealistic anachronism.
- Future Army investments must balance needs to sustain a trained and ready force, modernization, and current operations, ensuring that the Army does not again become a hollow force.
- Reserve Component policies and programs must be revamped and resourced to increase the capacity of citizen soldiers to respond rapidly to the wide range of emerging missions.
- Defense leaders—civilian, Active, and Reserve—must abandon their commitment to traditional policies and force structures that had the virtue of preserving the status quo but limited the value of Reserve forces to adapting to future needs.

Perhaps most of all, the military requires a new doctrine—a doctrine where Reserve preparedness is no longer an afterthought. If it wishes, the Pentagon could call this new policy the Abrams Doctrine. That would be a fitting tribute to a great American and fulfill the general's intent: building an Army where Active troops and citizen soldiers shared the risks and responsibilities of serving the nation.

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Conclusion

Sustaining a doctrine of doubtful worth and little promise for the future should not be high on the list of the Pentagon's priorities. Junking the policies justified by the Total Force Concept and the Abrams Doctrine may be a prerequisite for rethinking how the Reserves are organized, employed, and resourced. The idea that force structure should serve as some kind of presidential tripwire for the use of power should be abandoned, in part because of its dubious utility but primarily because it has resulted in retaining inefficient and under-resourced force structures.

A suitable replacement for the Total Force Concept would have to achieve three critical objectives.