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Military Readiness and the National Guard: A Crisis in the Making?

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The term “hollow force” describes the situation when military readiness declines because of a lack of adequate funding. A hollow force lacks the resources to provide trained and ready forces, to support ongoing operations, and to modernize. In the past, when America’s military has begun to hollow, the strain showed first in the National Guard. The same warning signs are here now. It will take a concerted effort from Congress and the administration to address the issue.

Blast from the Past

The last time America’s military went truly hollow was in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, and no part of the force was less prepared than the National Guard, where the Pentagon cut first and deepest. Recruiting plummeted. None of the Army Guard’s equipment was modernized. There was no money to train. Even after the Reagan defense build-up of the 1980s, readiness in the National Guard, particularly in the Army, lagged. That was because defense policies were designed to ensure that “units that fight first [would] be equipped first regardless of component.” Because war plans committed active duty forces as “first to fight” ahead of all but a handful of reserve units, these guidelines ensured that the lion’s share of resources went to active forces. The Army National Guard got what was left.

Back to the Future

Since 9/11 the military has used the National Guard more than at any time since World War II. Despite that, the Army is adopting new policy guidelines that may hamstring the Guard as much as in the 1970s. The Army is establishing a “force generation” model for all of its active and reserve forces. The model is designed to establish a schedule for predictable deployments. For the Guard, it calls for combat units in the “window” to be “called-up” for active service once every six years. As the Army becomes strapped for cash to modernize and train its forces, the force generation model is also being looked at as a “resourcing” tool, fully funding and outfitting only those units that are approaching the window for deployment. This policy will replicate the Cold War’s “first to fight” rules that assured that Army National Guard forces were chronically underfunded and unprepared to be called up for rapid deployment.

Since the end of the Cold War, we have learned that any part of America’s Army could be the first

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to the fight, whether it is called to deploy in support of operations in Afghanistan or Iraq or to respond to homeland security missions at home. Tiered-readiness systems that leave National Guard units ill-equipped and unprepared to serve the nation are unacceptable.

The Problem and the Solution

Inadequate defense spending over the long term, driven by ballooning federal entitlement programs that will consume an ever large part of the federal budget, will force the Army to turn the force generation model into a resource allocation model. That will be a big step back towards the hollow force. The solution is to get the federal budget under control, implement tax reforms that help grow the economy, and ensure robust defense budgets—not just this year but for the next decade. The alternative path puts the security of the nation at risk.

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