



Developing an Operational Reserve

A Policy and Historical Context
and the Way Forward

By JOHN D. WINKLER

Reserve Soldier who served with Stryker Brigade
in Iraq is now assigned to Provincial
Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan

U.S. Army (Teddy Wade)

Today, much attention is paid to a concept of employment for the U.S. military Reserve Components (RCs), encompassing the Army and Air National Guard and the Reserves of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard. This concept is entitled the “operational reserve.” The concept of an operational reserve, in which Reserve forces participate routinely and regularly in ongoing military missions, is viewed as a fairly recent development. This concept is distinct from an earlier view in which the RCs were seen mainly as a “strategic reserve” whose primary role was augmentation and reinforcement of Active forces during a major contingency—an event that was anticipated to occur at best once in a lifetime.

The operational reserve concept is now embodied in Department of Defense (DOD) policy in Directive 1200.17, “Managing the Reserve Components as an Operational Force.”¹ It was recently endorsed in the *2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) Report*, which stated, “Prevailing in today’s wars requires a Reserve Component that can serve in an operational capacity—available, trained, and equipped for predictable routine deployment.”² The QDR further points to a role for elements of the Reserve Components for preventing and deterring future conflict. The operational reserve is further embodied in Service doctrine as well—for example, in “Transforming the Army’s Reserve Components into an Operational Force.”³

The change from a purely strategic to a strategic and operational reserve, however, is not yet fully realized in DOD practice. In September 2009, the Government Accountability Office, for instance, focusing on the Army, noted that the Service “had not yet established the specific equipping, manning, and training levels required of an operational reserve” and “had not budgeted” for most of the costs it identified for transitioning its Reserve Components to an operational role.⁴

Moreover, recognition and acceptance of the operational reserve has not come quickly or easily. As recently as 2008, the Commission

on the National Guard and Reserve (CNGR) characterized the transition to an operational reserve as “unplanned,” requiring further scrutiny by the public and Congress.⁵ Nonetheless, the CNGR deemed the operational reserve a “necessity” and found “no reasonable alternative” considering “the threats that the United States faces at home and abroad, the looming fiscal challenges the nation confronts, the projected demands for forces, the unique capabilities resident in the reserve components, and their cost-effectiveness.”⁶

The CNGR report was an extremely important and influential document that added legitimacy to the concept of an operational reserve and framed the ensuing debate on how to implement a force that is workable near term and sustainable in the long term. At the same time, it should be noted that the establishment of an operational reserve can be seen as part revolution and part evolution. The CNGR built on previous efforts that preceded it, including reviews by the Center for Strategic and International Studies⁷ and earlier efforts inside and outside DOD. Some of the changes recently observed with respect to RC roles, missions, and organization were rooted in changes occurring within the Guard and Reserve beginning in the 1990s.

Important developments that provide the foundation for today’s operational reserve can also be attributed to policies and practices established within DOD during the past decade that aimed to support Reserve forces, strengthen and sustain them, and keep them relevant to current and future national security requirements.

These events provide a policy and historical context for subsequently assessing the current state of the operational reserve and for determining a future course for further development, including how conclusions and recommendations made by the CNGR can continue to assist DOD in implementing an operational National Guard and Reserve.

Key Events

The first key event was 9/11 and its immediate aftermath. This event took the Nation into a new era that required a new national security strategy, new thinking about the application of national power, including military power, and new ways of thinking about military strategy, doctrine, and employment of forces—which included Reserve forces. As *Operations Noble Eagle*,

Enduring Freedom, and *Iraqi Freedom* unfolded, it seemed clear to policymakers in the Pentagon that reliance on Reserve forces in the operational environment would continue as far as could be envisioned, that the role of the RC had changed fundamentally, and that approaches for managing Reserve forces would have to change and would not return to many of the approaches used prior to 9/11.

Another key event was the publication of the RC portion of the 2001 QDR (commonly referred to as “The Comprehensive Review”), published in December 2002, the development of which occurred in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. That document presumed a need for change in how Active and RC capabilities are balanced, a more uncertain threat environment than embodied in previous strategies and plans, and a need to size and structure military forces, including Reserve

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forces, to provide capabilities to meet a range for future threats over a potentially extended period. In the DOD view, *greater flexibility* and *new tools* were required to capitalize fully and adequately on Reserve forces.

This document focused on two principal areas for building more flexible and capable forces; the first was by developing and adopting innovative approaches to unit structures and organization (that is, for fostering better integration between Active and Reserve forces). Organizations such as “associate units,” which integrate Active and RC personnel inside operational units, initially developed in the Air Force but also found in other Services, were proposed for expansion and broader adoption.

A second area sought to change and simplify personnel policies and systems (that is, by establishing a “continuum of service” that would provide greater flexibility and more streamlined personnel management governing Active and Reserve forces). The “continuum of service” construct, buttressed by statutory and policy changes subsequently proposed and implemented, sought to

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Nebraska Army Reservists train with MK19 automatic grenade launchers in preparation for deployment to Iraq

transform the compensation and benefits system to encourage volunteerism and extended service among Reservists and eliminate artificial limits to service and benefits. Examples of artificial barriers and limits included the 179-day rule (which required that Reservists on Active duty in excess of 179 days be counted as “Active duty” for end strength accounting purposes), and limitations on the availability of housing allowances and other benefits for Reservists. At the same time, benefits were expanded to encourage participation—for example, by making bonuses such as affiliation and critical skills bonuses more accessible and competitive with similar bonuses offered to Active-duty members.

Another key development in the aftermath of 9/11 and beyond was the recognition that homeland defense is a fundamental defense mission, that there is a requirement for defense support to civil authorities, and that the RC and National Guard in particular need to be fundamental players in the “front-line” across America. Furthermore, Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath in 2005 made clear the inadequacies of existing command and control and the need for improved unity

of effort in the military response to a catastrophic event in the homeland.

An additional key development occurred in the early part of the decade, as operations were planned and executed in Afghanistan and Iraq. It began with a series of seemingly simple questions about Reserve forces posed by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in a number of so-called snowflakes – for example, “Why are some key skill sets only in the Reserves?” “Why does it take so long to make Reserve forces ready to deploy?” and “Why are Reserve forces required in the early entry phases of contingency operations?” At the same time, statutory and policy limitations on the frequency and length of deployments conflicted with pressures for lengthy and repeated mobilizations of Reservists with needed skills.

The response and resulting dialogue between Secretary Rumsfeld and DOD staff eventually produced an overarching concept of “judicious use” to govern utilization of Reserve forces and the first set of utilization rules establishing limits on mobilization of Guard and Reserve members. These were contained in a memorandum dated July 9, 2003, and signed by Secretary Rumsfeld,

which set a planning objective to limit involuntary mobilizations to a rate of 1 year mobilized to 5 years demobilized.⁸ This ratio rested on the assumption that there needed to be a substantial break between periods of activation, and that this ratio was seemingly sustainable over a military and civilian career and fell under existing protections provided by the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Act, which provides job protections for up to 5 years of activation (therefore, extending over a 30-year civilian career).

Another key event grew out of discussions of Reserve utilization. DOD began to conduct quantitative analyses of a phenomenon referred to as “stress on the force,” which revealed wide differences in utilization of military skills and occupations in both the Active and Reserve forces. The analyses, for example, showed that Servicemembers in military occupations such as military police were deployed and/or activated at far higher rates than Servicemembers in other military occupations (for example, medical occupations). Overall, these analyses exposed large disparities between the force structure and the need for specific skills.⁹

“Force rebalancing” resulted, which changed and improved allocations of capabilities within Active and Reserve forces relative to demand. Specifically, it led to the rebalancing of over 225,000 spaces from fiscal year (FY) 2003 to FY 2016, which relieved some of the burden across skill areas and components, preserving the sustainability of both for an extended period of utilization. This line of analysis also girded efforts to encourage cross-training of lesser used skills to create “in lieu of” capability, to use of military

consideration.¹² Many Reservists were willing to spend more time on Active duty simply because they liked that status and were willing to spend even more time as such in response to appropriate incentives.¹³

Shortly after assuming office, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates signed a memorandum entitled “Utilization of the Total Force.”¹⁴ The policies established in this memo institutionalized judicious and prudent use of the Reserve Components by limiting involuntary mobilization to

Reservists, and predictability for Servicemembers and their families.

DOD Directive 1200.17 codified nine principles in policy for managing the Reserve Components as an operational force. This landmark directive recognized that the Reserve Components provide both operational capabilities and strategic depth to meet U.S. defense requirements across the full spectrum of conflict. Secretary Gates signed the directive, signaling it as a historic “Total Force” policy document that follows a precedent established by Melvin Laird in the 1970s and resulting for the first time in the incorporation of the “Abrams Doctrine” into written policy.

The key developments in the past decade in policy and practice that governed the transformation of Reserve forces and enabled the development of an operational reserve within the Department of Defense were as follows:

- recognition that the Nation had entered a period of extended conflict that would require continued operational contributions from the Reserve Components

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capabilities from other Services to help relieve strain on ground forces, and to identification of “alternative sourcing solutions” from coalition, interagency, and civilian sources to meet combatant commanders’ requirements while reducing demands on Active and Reserve military forces.

In 2005, DOD sponsored a symposium that researchers were invited to in order to present results of quantitative studies and analyses addressing the impact of mobilizations on Reservists, families, and employers. This event was stimulated by media reports and quotes from so-called experts whose descriptions of reality were strikingly at odds with perceptions held by DOD members. The adage of the symposium was “there can be many opinions but only one set of facts.” The New Guard and Reserve Conference (also known as the “facts and myths” conference) provided a forum for discussion of the evolving role of the Reserve Components and for establishing a baseline understanding of Reserve force utilization and its implications. The proceedings were later published in an edited volume.¹⁰

Research findings presented stated that recruiting and retention were holding up well in the face of extended, repeated deployments. Indeed, attrition was higher among those Reservists who were activated and did not deploy than among those who were activated and deployed.¹¹ On average, Reservists who were activated were better off financially than before activation in terms of total compensation, when the Federal tax exemptions and other allowances approved by Congress for troops in combat are taken into

12 months. It reinforced and reestablished the policy goals of 1 year mobilized to 5 years demobilized (with planning objectives for Active forces set as 1 year deployed to 2 years at home station), and required alerts up to 24 months prior to activation, which had dramatic, positive effects on the sustainability of the war effort, employer ability to support



U.S. Army (Rick Scavetta)

Army National Guard and Reserve commanders meet with commander of U.S. Army Africa to discuss role of Reserve Soldiers in future missions to Africa

- recognition of homeland defense and defense support to civil authorities as a central defense mission with a fundamental role for the RCs and the National Guard in particular

- rebalancing of force structure to enhance capabilities, spread and better equalize the burdens of deployment across the components consistent with their characteristics, and sustain utilization of Active and Reserve forces

- promotion of integration, particularly at the unit level, between Active and Reserve forces to meet future defense missions

- creation in concept, and to a degree in policy and law, of a continuum of service to encourage voluntary participation and make personnel management more seamless and transparent

- establishment through experience and empirical research that Reserve members would join and stay in units subject to continuous activations

- development of utilization rules to set goals and limits on the duration of activation and deployment and amount of “dwell time” between them

- publication of a directive establishing policy principles for managing the Reserve Components as an operational force.

Current State

Let us now turn to the implications of the foregoing for the conclusions and recommendations made by the CNGR in its final report in January 2008. At the time of its publication, the CNGR report provided a comprehensive and extensive review and critique of how far DOD and the Services had come in implementing the operational reserve concept and how additional effort was still required. The report was and continues to be viewed as a definitive treatment of the topic.

In response to the report, DOD established a deliberative process for reviewing and assessing the final recommendations of the CNGR and developing responses and positions for the Secretary of Defense to endorse. This process was chaired by the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, and the working group that conducted the review was composed of 28 senior representatives, including representatives of the Services and components, National Guard Bureau, and Reserve Forces Policy Board. The day-to-day management and staffing were handled by staff of the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, many of whom are



U.S. Air Force (Dean V. Kuhlman)

F-16 pilot with Minnesota Air National Guard prepares for combat air patrol as part of Operation Noble Eagle

current RC members on Active duty or civilians with previous RC experience.

From this author's vantage point as a participant in the review, DOD viewed many of the conclusions as broadly consistent with the policy direction that it had taken to implement and support an operational reserve force. A few of the recommendations did not seem internally consistent or helpful for transforming the Guard and Reserve to an operational force. Some specific recommendations did not appear to acknowledge actions already taken or progress achieved; some did not seem to

determined outside DOD scope of responsibility and deferred to other departments). Overall, DOD viewed 29 of the 82 “accepted” recommendations as “already implemented,” while 53 of the 82 “accepted” ones required further action to be taken.

The recommendations requiring further action were assigned to DOD offices for development of implementation plans. These plans were due in April 2009. A number of observers, however, believe that momentum has lagged since then and important steps still remain to be taken to fully

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recognize the objectives of existing policies; and others were deemed well-meaning but too far-reaching and therefore unachievable.

In general, however, the conclusions and most recommendations made in the CNGR final report appeared congruent with the developments in policy and practice described above. They identified issues of continuing importance for management of Reserve forces as an operational force and pointed to further changes needed in policy and/or statute. At the end of the process, DOD chose to endorse in whole or part 82 of the 95 recommendations and reject 11 recommendations. (Two additional recommendations were

realize the vision of an operational reserve. The last QDR, and renewed attention now being paid to the recommendations of the CNGR, provides an opportunity to review progress and ascertain where further effort may be needed.

It may less useful now to “grade” DOD on how well it implemented CNGR recommendations but instead to revisit and recalibrate them. Briefly, this author recommends that priority be given to the following areas, particularly in an era of growing concerns about Federal spending and the deficit, the size of the defense budget, and the need to reduce and control costs:

■ Incorporating operational reserve utilization into strategic planning (CNGR Conclusion One, Creating an Operational Reserve). This step is necessary for establishing the overarching set of alterations and reforms to sustain a ready, rotational force. The overall conclusion, speaking to the necessity of an operational reserve, is wholly consistent and congruent with the recent policy developments governing transformation of Reserve forces described above.

■ Resourcing the operational reserve (CNGR Conclusion Four, Developing a Ready, Capable, and Available Operational Reserve). This step is vital to ensuring the sustainability of a viable operational reserve force. CNGR recommendations calling for increased transparency of RC procurement funding and tracking of RC equipment, as well as the recommendation concerning the development of funding plans to support the operational portion of the RC in future defense budgets (reinforced by the GAO report), are vital.

■ Establishing a true continuum of service (Conclusion Three, Creating a Continuum of Service). This step is necessary for achieving a 21st-century human capital strategy and is congruent with current private sector practices and consistent with recommendations made in previous studies by such bodies as the Defense Advisory Commission on Military Compensation in 2006.¹⁵ While some recommendations will require considerable time to accomplish (for example, merging the Defense and Reserve Officers Personnel Management Acts), they are important to pursue.

Active Duty for Operational Support (ADOS) is a continuum of service tool of particular importance. ADOS was envisioned as a tool to provide the RCs with strategic operational capability. It allows RC members to be on Active duty for up to 3 years, without counting against end strength and without grade controls, to permit the creation of units that may be needed for a period of time but that may not be required within the permanent force structure. In FY10, it provides the RCs with 69,200 Full Time Equivalents on any given day to build such capability.

ADOS resulted from a compromise with staff of the House Armed Services Committee who wished to retain visibility over the number of RC members who serve voluntarily on Active duty—for reasons similar to why DOD must account to the Congress

for Active-duty end strength. ADOS was not intended to be a fund to support augmentees in headquarters organizations on a permanent basis. That is why there is a so-called 1095 rule stating that individuals serving more than 1,095 consecutive days on Active duty should be counted as Active-duty end strength. The logic states that beyond such a limit, the position should be managed as full-time Active duty or Active Guard/Reserve.

There is also a good deal more that remains to be addressed as part of the continuum of service, which seeks to broaden participation by offering more options

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for serving and developing a career in the military. It provides for transitions back and forth between full-time and part-time service in the military and for greater connectivity to civilian society, civilian employers, and civilian skills. The Army Reserve's employer partnership program is a good example of the latter. In addition, continuum of service is *not* a Reserve program and is equally applicable to the Active Component.

A true continuum of service does require fundamental changes such as, greater limited term and lateral entry opportunities, relaxation of "up-or-out," and a promotion system that is experience- and competency-based and not cohort-based. For these reasons, CNGR recommendations regarding the promotion system and Reserve Officer Personnel Management Act/Defense Officer Personnel Management Act are key. Duty status reform and an integrated personnel pay system are also important for achieving simplicity and efficiency. These recommendations remain critical and should be pursued.

Remaining CNGR recommendations pertaining to the DOD role in the Homeland (Conclusion Two) and Support to Members, Families, and Employers (Conclusion Five) remain valid, while some of the initial CNGR recommendations pertaining to reform of organizations and institutions will not achieve their stated goal of promoting integration across components.

The Department of Defense and the military Services have come a long way in realizing the vision of an operational reserve. Much more, however, needs to be done. Continued progress, informed by recent experience and with continued focus on the worthy conclusions and recommendations of the Commission on the National Guard and Reserve, will be needed to achieve a fully capable and sustainable operational reserve. **JFQ**



Georgia National Guard officer returns control of facility to Iraqi army in Basra

U.S. Air Force (Chrissy Best)

NOTES

¹ Department of Defense (DOD) Directive 1200.17, "Managing the Reserve Components as an Operational Force," October 2008.

² DOD, *2010 Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: DOD, February 2010), 53.

³ Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, "Transforming the Army's Reserve Components into an Operational Force," March 29, 2010.

⁴ Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Reserve Forces: Army Needs to Finalize an Implementation Plan and Funding Strategy for Sustaining an Operational Reserve Force*, GAO-09-898 (Washington, DC: GAO, September 2009), 35.

⁵ Commission on the National Guard and Reserve (CNGR), *Transforming the National Guard and Reserves into a 21st-century Operational Force* (Arlington, VA: CNGR, January 31, 2008), 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷ Christine E. Wormuth et al., *Beyond Goldwater-Nichols Phase III Report: The Future of the National Guard and Reserves* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2006).

⁸ Memorandum from the Secretary of Defense, "Rebalancing Forces," July 9, 2003.

⁹ Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs (Readiness, Training, and Mobilization), "Rebalancing Forces: Easing the Stress on the Guard and Reserve," January 15, 2004.

¹⁰ John D. Winkler and Barbara A. Bicksler, ed., *The New Guard and Reserve* (San Roman, CA: Falcon Books, 2008).

¹¹ Michele A. Dolfini-Reed et al., *Determining Patterns of Reserve Attrition Since September 11, 2001* (Alexandria, VA: CNA Corporation, 2005).

¹² David S. Loughran, Jacob Alex Klerman, and Craig Martin, *Activation and the Earnings of Reservists*, MG-474 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2006).

¹³ Diana S. Lien and Michael L. Hansen, *Compensation and Voluntary Participation in a Continuum of Service* (Alexandria, VA: CNA Corporation, 2006).

¹⁴ Memorandum from the Secretary of Defense, "Utilization of the Total Force," January 19, 2007.

¹⁵ Defense Advisory Committee on Military Compensation (DACMC), *The Military Compensation System: Completing the Transition to an All-Volunteer Force* (Arlington, VA: DACMC, April 2006).



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