



The War against Reserves

By Frederick W. Kagan

U.S. defense policy today rests heavily on two basic assumptions: that the American armed forces will make perfect decisions and take perfect actions, and that the enemy will never surprise us or offer us unexpected opportunities to exploit. These assumptions can be seen in the elimination of reserve forces from all echelons of the military structure and the heavy burden that the current war has placed on the Army Reserves and National Guard. The result of these decisions has been to leave the United States with little ability to react to unforeseen difficulties, either in Iraq or Afghanistan or elsewhere. If this policy continues, it will place American national security in grave jeopardy for years to come.

As the Pentagon goes through another Quadrennial Defense Review, it is time to consider a problem that has been too long ignored in U.S. strategy, force, and campaign planning: the problem of reserves. At issue are not simply the formal Reserves and National Guards of the various services, although the stresses placed upon those units by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan deserve much more attention than they have received. The crisis those units face, however, stems from an even more fundamental problem in the way the American civilian and military leadership thinks about war. Simply put, the U.S. military is increasingly prepared to fight wars that proceed as expected within a predictable international security context. It is increasingly unprepared to handle surprises, and current trends within the Pentagon are only making this problem worse. The progress of those trends can be tracked through the treatment of reserves at all levels.

Successful commanders have long understood the importance of maintaining a reserve. Keeping some forces out of a fight at any level of war accomplishes two critical goals. It mitigates the danger that an unexpected event will unhinge a

successful military undertaking, and it offers the ability to take advantage of unanticipated opportunities that suddenly beckon. From ancient times generals have seen the timely employment of reserves as one of their most essential functions. Caesar excelled at this, skillfully using reserves in the fight against the Gauls in 52 B.C. at the Battle of Gergovia to prevent defeat from becoming a disastrous rout and at the Battle of Alesia to turn the enemy's final attack into the decisive point in his victory there. Napoleon's use of such forces was also justly famous, and the image of his reserves streaming across the field at Austerlitz to finish off the allies quickly became a central feature of his propaganda and his reputation. His failure to employ his reserves at Borodino, on the other hand, may well have given the Russians the victory in that critical fight.

The tradition of maintaining operational or tactical reserves is much weaker in the United States, however. Civil War commanders generally employed all the forces available to them as quickly as possible without holding any back. This tendency on the part of Union commanders made possible many of Lee's successes—had Hooker maintained a reserve at Chancellorsville, for instance, Jackson's flank march might have been far less devastating, especially considering

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the relative sizes of the forces engaged. Eisenhower's failure to maintain a sizable operational reserve during the European campaign likewise allowed the Germans to achieve considerable initial success during the Battle of the Bulge, as American forces already engaged in combat had to reorient rapidly to meet the unexpected threat. U.S. forces in the first Gulf War advanced with no real reserve at all—they marched nearly line-abreast in a wide sweep from the shores of the Persian Gulf to beyond the Iraq-Kuwaiti border. U.S. troops fighting in Operation Iraqi Freedom had a reserve only because of a diplomatic failure: when the Turks would not allow the 4th Infantry Division to launch an attack from their soil, that unit made its way to Kuwait where it served as an accidental operational reserve. The ready availability of this unit proved critical as the military victory collapsed into insurgency against the expectations of the senior leadership.

Strategic Reserves

America's leaders have been historically less reluctant to maintain reserves at the grand strategic level. General George C. Marshall attempted to maintain a reserve of uncommitted Army divisions during World War II, although he ended up deploying eighty-nine of ninety mobilized formations to combat before the war was over. Confronted with the unexpected invasion of South Korea in 1950, the Truman administration responded by mobilizing a large force to meet that attack rather than denuding Europe of the troops stationed there to defend against the Soviet Union. As a result, Truman created a de facto reserve of very high quality forces. Lyndon B. Johnson pursued a similar approach during the Vietnam War for the same reasons. The collapse of the Warsaw Pact shortly before Operation Desert Storm freed up a large number of those European-based forces to deploy to Saudi Arabia—and left still more divisions available in the United States and Asia to respond to other contingencies or to reinforce the troops fighting in the Persian Gulf, had that become necessary.

In the cases of Korea, Vietnam, and Desert Storm, of course, this grand strategic reserve remained unused. The Iraqis, who had never expected to fight the United States or prepared for such a contest, proved no match for American forces, and the troops sent to liberate Kuwait turned out to be more than were necessary to secure the limited victory that George H. W. Bush accepted. Both Vietnam and Korea, on the other hand,

were seen as sideshow wars, and the forces in Europe were thought to be engaged in the far more important mission of deterring the Soviet Union. Truman was willing to accept a stalemate—and Johnson and Nixon, a defeat—rather than escalating the conflicts further or undermining that critical deterrence mission.

The existence of a sizable uncommitted reserve after Operation Iraqi Freedom has proved absolutely essential to that mission, on the other hand. As the insurgency grew, the military was able to send new forces into Iraq to combat terrorists and rebels, and it has also managed, just barely, to sustain that large presence over the intervening years. The administration had not foreseen that a large-scale insurgency would develop and had made no preparations to combat it. It was truly a situation that only the presence of a significant grand strategic reserve could have salvaged. That reserve was available at all because of the efforts made over the preceding decade to maintain the capability to fight two major wars at nearly the same time.

Two-War Capability. The current two-war capability was first established as U.S. military policy by the first Bush administration in 1991.¹ It was formally reaffirmed by Secretary of Defense Les Aspin in the 1993 Bottom-Up Review, and by Secretary of Defense William Cohen in the 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review.² As early as 1992, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell testified that the proposed “Base Force” he and Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney were advocating could only handle two simultaneous wars with great risk.³ Aspin then reduced the size of the military. In 1997, the National Defense Panel report called for the abandonment of the capability in order to focus more on military transformation;⁴ the 2001 QDR reiterated that call, albeit more obliquely, while Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld testified that the U.S. military really did not have the capability to fight two major wars anyway.⁵ The current rumors swirling around the QDR about similar suggestions show that nothing has changed: it is generally understood that the United States does not have the capacity to fight two wars at the same time, but many still believe that the solution to that problem is to abandon the standard altogether rather than to redress the deficiencies. The result of such a decision could either be to generate an excuse to cut America's already overstretched forces further or simply to recognize the current reality and to declare an unwillingness to attempt to address it.

The result, in either case, will be to leave the U.S. military without a meaningful grand strategic reserve for the foreseeable future. The operations in Iraq and Afghanistan now require nearly the full commitment of the U.S. active ground forces. This is because it is necessary to rotate troops into and out of those countries periodically, which requires a rotational base two-to-three times larger than the forces actually deployed at any moment. America's armed forces today cannot both sustain such a rotational policy and still have reserves available to handle unexpected developments in Iraq or Afghanistan—to say nothing of fighting another serious, or even not-so-serious, adversary elsewhere. The failure to maintain a military really able to fight two wars at once has led to this crisis; the abandonment of any effort to do so can only make it worse.

From Strategic to Operational Reserves. The crisis of reserves is even greater, however, because the current strain on the military has transformed a traditional grand strategic reserve—the Reserves and National Guard—into a strategic and even an operational reserve.⁶ The active army is now so badly overstretched that it cannot continue to function on a day-to-day basis without using more than 100,000 Guard and Reserve soldiers in long-term deployments. Guard combat formations are patrolling in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Guard and Reserve support units are keeping the army running. The problems this mobilization is causing are twofold. First, it is burning out the Guard and Reserves. Members of those organizations generally did not sign up for extended tours abroad except in the case of dire national emergency. Their prolonged deployment thus severely hurts recruiting. Second, the overuse of these units has stripped away the last remaining real grand strategic reserve the nation had. Should another war arise suddenly or should the situation in Iraq or Afghanistan suddenly deteriorate, not only would there not be troops in the active army sufficient to respond, but the Guard and Reserves would be unable to do so as well. The administration has thus accepted an enormous degree of grand strategic risk.

The disregard of reserves is not restricted to the level of grand strategy, moreover. The determination, partly justified by the paucity of forces overall, to keep troop levels in Iraq and Afghanistan constantly at relatively low levels has deprived those forces of any meaningful operational reserves. Commanders in Iraq do not have enough troops simultaneously to train their Iraqi counterparts, protect their own supply lines, close the borders,

and fight insurgents—all critical tasks. They have been forced thus to choose among these tasks, leaving some undone or done imperfectly. The result has been slower training of the Iraqi forces than was necessary and a reduced ability to reestablish security in the country. Worse still, the development of unexpected difficulties in Iraq creates unfortunate ripple effects. The need to generate force to attack rebels in Fallujah—twice—stripped troops badly needed in other regions from their missions. There was no reserve to deal with that task. Should additional similar problems arise, and it seems that they well might in Afghanistan as the Taliban appears to be rising again, there is no operational reserve available to respond.

Rather than learning these obvious lessons, however, the army is working hard to institutionalize a lack of reserves at the tactical level. Its current transformation program, the development of “modular” brigades, reduces the number of maneuver battalions per brigade from three to two to create a larger number of brigades available for independent deployment. The goal is certainly laudable, and the change may seem at first insignificant until the problem of the tactical employment of such units is considered. A normal U.S. maneuver brigade today has three battalions, and doctrine calls for it to advance with two forward and one—the reserve—back. When either or both of the lead battalions make contact with the enemy, the reserve battalion is available to move on either flank or to reinforce as necessary. It can thus both take advantage of opportunities and mitigate risks. A two-battalion brigade has no such luxury. It is reduced to a dilemma common to eighteenth-century armies: whether to advance in column or line with one battalion behind the other or both advancing abreast. It can therefore either have half of its combat power in reserve—far too high a ratio—or none at all. The only alternative is to break up one or both of the battalions to create an ad hoc reserve, a process that will inevitably be harmful to the combat effectiveness of the units involved, since companies are not designed to fight independently. When this “transformation” is complete, therefore, the U.S. military will have gone a long way toward eliminating reserves at all levels of war.

Causes of the Crisis

This war on reserves seems at first glance to stem from several sources. The refusal to create or sustain grand strategic reserves by increasing the size of the ground

forces is justified on budgetary grounds—the country cannot afford a significant increase in the defense budget at this time, it is said. The refusal to maintain operational reserves in Iraq and Afghanistan is attributed to a number of factors: the strain on the ground forces resulting from the long deployment, the desire to maintain a “minimum footprint” in the theater for political reasons, and the refusal of the theater commanders to ask for more troops. The determination to eliminate tactical reserves through the “modularity” program comes, on the one hand, from the apparent need to make Army units more deployable and, on the other, from the conviction that the advanced intelligence, communications, and targeting systems supposedly integrated into the new units will make reserves unnecessary. It is possible, however, to cut through this apparent welter of reasons to identify the one that really matters: the ill-advised search for military efficiency.

The argument that the nation cannot afford larger ground forces contains within it an important assumption: that military transformation programs are at least as important as programs designed to support ongoing missions. Rumsfeld and other senior leaders, including President Bush, have repeatedly declared that “modernizing” or “transforming” the U.S. military cannot be slowed or delayed even during the current conflict.⁷ They also argue that that modernization process will allow the military to become more efficient in the application of force. Long-range and robotic sensors will identify targets, long-range precision-guided weapons will attack them, and the same sensors will verify their destruction. Ground forces play a minor role in this vision of war-as-targeting-drill, and the administration has been reluctant to do anything to increase the size of a branch of the service it sees as relatively less important for the transformed military it seeks.

Ground forces also suffer from another problem: technology becomes less expensive as time goes on, but the cost of people continually increases. Soldiers have to be paid, fed, housed, and clothed; they and their families require health care, retirement benefits, and so on. As the standard of living in the United States increases, these costs will increase as well. Computers that cost thousands of dollars two years ago, on the other hand, now cost a few hundred. Technology seems a much more efficient use of money than the long-term and growing investment required to attract and retain soldiers.

The result of these factors has been a determination to keep the ground forces as small as possible. When Rumsfeld first took office, rumors flew that he intended

to cut the active army from ten divisions to eight. September 11 put paid to that idea, but he has remained steadfastly hostile to any increase in the size of the force, even as senior congressmen and senators have called for it. Rumsfeld clearly prefers to preserve technology and its promise at the expense of the human material of the military. He is thereby betting that the technology will work and more ground forces will be unnecessary, and he has been willing to back that bet by keeping the ground forces at or just below the minimum level necessary for the missions they are now engaged in.

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This clearly stated preference, along with the well-known strain it has imposed upon the army and the Marines, has powerfully influenced the senior commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are well aware that the army has little reserve to send them and that to call for an increased deployment to their theaters might badly harm the service. They are also aware that Rumsfeld is determined to keep force levels as low as possible, as he has repeatedly stated. His declarations that there is no need to send more troops to Iraq because the commanders have not asked for more are therefore disingenuous—they reveal, rather, that the grand strategic problems of the army stemming from the preference for technology over people have trickled down to the theater level.

The belief in the virtue of precision-guided munitions and long-range sensors is used to justify the war on reserves at all levels. Advocates of this “new American way of war” argue that American air power will be sufficient to hold off adversaries until the army can disengage and arrive—if ground forces are necessary at all. Within the army, they argue that improved abilities to identify and attack targets at long range obviate the need for tactical reserves—two battalions plus a target-identification-and-tracking squadron can do the work of three battalions in the past. Superior intelligence and strike capabilities, in other words, eliminate the need for reserves.

No Room for Error

This is not the place to consider the relative value of air power and land power, of people or technology, or what defense budget the nation can afford. It is essential instead to recognize the assumption at the root of this search for efficiency and war on reserves—that the American leadership will make no mistakes, the enemy offer no surprises, and the situation proffer no unexpected opportunities. The prioritization of air power over land power may be right or wrong, but with the elimination of adequate ground reserves, error may lead to catastrophe. At the tactical level, modular brigades may find that their targeting systems do not work for technical reasons, because the enemy finds ways to counter them or because they are not relevant for the situation. Insurgencies, for example, are notoriously resistant to technological solutions of this variety, as we have seen over the past four years. At the operational level, it is already clear that the lack of reserves in Iraq and Afghanistan has led to needless delays and setbacks in those critical missions.

At the grand strategic level the risks run and opportunities lost are also growing. Air power might stop a North Korean invasion alone, but, if it did not, the United States would have very little else with which to respond. Air power might deter or dismantle a nearly nuclear Iran or Syria, but, if it did not, America would have no meaningful alternative approach. The constraints on available forces seem already to have been translated into constraints on U.S. policy, furthermore, as an administration that went to war to prevent Saddam Hussein from developing weapons of mass destruction is now negotiating from a very weak position with an avowedly nuclear North Korea and an Iran that has declared its intention to follow suit. The absence of a meaningful grand strategic reserve has left the president with few viable options.

To assume that wars, campaigns, and battles will go according to plan without major mistakes or surprises is the height of folly. America has never fought such a war, nor has any other nation. The elimination of reserves at all levels requires such perfection in all future conflicts, however, and it raises the potential price of each mistake to levels far too high to bear. It results from a misguided application of business principles to the business of war.

In business, the search for efficiency is wise and, indeed, vital. Mistakes may cost money, even great sums of money, but the more efficient company will generally

prosper over the long term, overcoming short-term setbacks resulting from efficiencies that proved to be wrong-headed. Militaries cannot afford to pursue such an approach. When the cost of mistakes is measured in lives and the destruction of property, the prioritization of the most efficient use of resources is unacceptable. That is why great and successful commanders throughout the ages have understood the importance of maintaining reserves, and it is why the U.S. military should reconsider its abandonment of this principle during the forthcoming defense review and in the years to come.

Notes

1. Dick Cheney, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress*, January 1991 (Washington, D.C., 1991), 5.

2. Les Aspin, *Report on the Bottom-Up Review* (Washington, D.C., 1993); U.S. Defense Department, William S. Cohen, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review* (Washington, D.C., 1997).

3. General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testimony during the hearing of the House Armed Services Committee, February 6, 1992.

4. National Defense Panel, *Transforming Defense: National Security in the 21st Century: Report of the National Defense Panel* (Washington, D.C., 1997).

5. U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, D.C., 2001); Donald Rumsfeld, testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, June 21, 2001.

6. Grand strategy refers to the maintenance and employment of all of the forces of the state; strategy refers to all of the forces within a given theater (Iraq or Afghanistan, for instance); operations refer to forces used in a specific campaign or major task (the pacification of the Sunni Triangle, for instance); tactics refers to forces engaged in combat (the battle around Fallujah, say).

7. President George W. Bush, "The President Speaks on War Effort to Citadel Cadets," Office of the Press Secretary (The Citadel: Charleston, S.C., December 11, 2001); Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz (speech at a conference on defense transformation sponsored by the Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C.: February 2004): "In the wake of that terrible [September 11th] attack on America, some people said the global war on terrorism meant that transformation had to be put on the back burner. Don Rumsfeld thought otherwise. He said, 'The global war on terror has made transforming an even more urgent priority.'"