

one
Shadows of Vietnam

“We Ought to Call Up the Reserves”

Military commanders returning from America’s defeat in the Vietnam War vowed that they would never again send the U.S. Army into sustained combat without calling up reserve forces. They made good on this promise and in doing so set the stage for what has ultimately led to more than 186,000 reserve soldiers, including the 893rd Military Police Reserve Company, being deployed in the wars of Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11.¹ According to General Earl G. Wheeler, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,

We felt that it would be desirable to have a reserve call-up in order to make sure that the people of the U.S. knew that we were in a war and not engaged at some two-penny military adventure. Because we didn’t think it was going to prove to be a two-penny military adventure by any manner or means.²

In the early months of 1965, U.S. executive and military leaders agreed that the Vietnam War was going badly. In early January, elite elements of the South Vietnamese Army were defeated by the Vietcong in major battles, North Vietnamese Army units were beginning to move into

South Vietnam, and there was deep concern that the North was preparing for an all-out offensive on Saigon (now Ho Chi Min City), the capital of South Vietnam. In the words of Robert McNamara, then secretary of defense, “South Vietnam seemed to be on the brink of total collapse.”³ On January 27, McNamara and his deputy, McGeorge Bundy, met with President Lyndon Johnson to discuss what became known as the “fork in the road” memorandum, which said that to avoid defeat, the president needed to decide between a major escalation of U.S. military power in Vietnam or an all-out effort to negotiate as favorable a withdrawal as possible given the conditions on the ground. McNamara and Bundy favored escalation while making sure the president knew that his secretary of state, Dean Rusk, wanted to find a way to make the existing course of aid and military assistance to the South Vietnamese government work because he saw no favorable consequences resulting from either escalation or withdrawal.

Johnson decided on escalation, accepting recommendations from the civilian and military leaders of the Defense Department to initiate bombing of North Vietnam and commit U.S. ground forces to wage war in South Vietnam. He increased troop strength from 23,000 to 175,000 in 1965 with the knowledge that the Pentagon wanted an additional 100,000 men committed in 1966. The debate shifted to how such a force would be put together and deployed—specifically, whether to call up reserve forces.⁴ At a July 13, 1965, press conference, President Johnson floated the possibility of mobilizing the Reserve: “Any substantial increase in the present level of our efforts to turn back the aggressors in South Vietnam will require steps to insure that our reserves of men and equipment of the United States remain entirely adequate for any and all emergencies.”⁵ And, in a July 14 phone conversation with McNamara, the president seemed to be leaning toward calling up the Reserve, a decision strongly favored by the Pentagon’s civilian and military leaders.

McNamara: If we do go as far as my paper suggested—sending numbers of men over there—we ought to call up the reserves. . . . Almost surely, if we called up reserves, you would want to go to the Congress to get additional authority. This would be a vehicle for draw-

ing together support. Now you'd say, "Along with that approach [escalation], we are . . . continuing this political initiative to probe for a willingness to negotiate a reasonable settlement here. And we ask your support under these circumstances." And that's a vehicle by which you both get the authority to call up the reserves and also tie them into the whole program.

President: Well, that makes sense.⁶

On July 21, the president polled the defense and military leaders on his National Security Council, securing unanimity for escalation that included mobilization of reserve forces. However, at a National Security Council meeting one week later, Johnson indicated that he did not favor going to Congress for everything the White House and Pentagon might desire, including declaring a state of emergency and calling up the reserves. Instead, he added another option, proposing to give the military what it wanted but avoiding a call-up of reserves. The president again polled the room regarding his revised option to escalate without going to Congress or mobilizing the Reserve. The key moment came when the president turned to General Earl Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff:

"Do you, General Wheeler, agree?" Wheeler nodded his agreement. It was said, by someone who was present, an extraordinary moment, like watching a lion-tamer dealing with some of the great lions. Everyone knew that Wheeler objected, that the Chiefs wanted more, that they wanted a wartime footing and a call-up of the Reserves; the thing they feared most was a partial war and a partial commitment.⁷

Wheeler and the rest of the Pentagon were planning to escalate initially with a partial call-up of 235,000 reserve forces, believing that the Reserve was crucial to securing an effective fighting force and generating the needed popular support for prosecuting what everyone in the room presumed would be a long war. According to at least one insider, General John A. Wickham, the sentiments were so strong in the Pentagon about calling up the Reserve that the Joint Chiefs talked about resignation when the initial decision was made to delay the mobilization of reserve forces.

In 1964–66, I served as military assistant to Army Chief of Staff Harold K. Johnson and recall many deliberations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and army leaders about the need to call up reserves for Vietnam. General Johnson and the other chiefs made their case with the president, who decided against any call-up. The Joint Chiefs debated among themselves whether to resign as a result of their disagreements with the president, but they decided that the more prudent and appropriate course would be to continue serving and do what was possible to support the war without a call-up of reserves.⁸

Despite top military advisers' repeated requests to mobilize the Reserve, on July 28 the president announced plans to increase U.S. forces immediately to 125,000, deciding that the buildup would be secured through increased conscription. Without mobilizing the Reserve, the president could continue to pursue his very ambitious social agenda and escalate "without exposing the depth of U.S. involvement" in Vietnam.⁹ The Pentagon tried again in 1966 and 1967 to persuade the president to call up the Reserve, but to no avail. Both the White House and the Pentagon recognized the Reserve's political significance to any war effort. President Johnson realized that a call-up of the reserves would "require a great deal of money and a huge sacrifice for the American people."¹⁰ He recalled the domestic political turmoil that arose when President John F. Kennedy had mobilized the reserves during the 1961 Berlin crisis: after he floated the idea of calling up the Reserve, members of Congress reported that they were already getting flak from families who would likely be affected were the reserves mobilized. The political calculations of Johnson and Congress converged as most politicians saw fewer obstacles to expanding the draft than to mobilizing reserve forces. Two analysts of these events put the political calculations in stark terms: "Reservists and guardsmen were better connected, better educated, more affluent, and whiter than their peers in the active forces."¹¹

Whether or not these factors drove the political decision to withhold the reserve, historians broadly agree that the question of mobilizing the Reserve was a major policy issue carried on inside the U.S. government from 1965 through 1967 with little public awareness or debate.¹² For the

Pentagon, the president's decision meant that the manpower to wage a ground war in Vietnam would rely on conscripts and inexperienced officers and that the best opportunity for securing public support for what was rapidly becoming an American war was lost.

Failure to call up reserves meant that the army, for example, had to expand from roughly 900K to over 1.5 million by rapid training and promotion of conscripts and officers. As a result, we fought the early years of the Vietnam War with less experienced junior leaders than we might have had were the Guard and reservists called up. Consequently, we might have suffered fewer casualties and achieved more tactical successes if the army had been able to expand with experienced NCOs [noncommissioned officers] and officers from the Guard and reserves. Moreover, a call-up would have engaged the public more closely with the war effort, thus engendering more public support.¹³

An added consequence of the president's decision was that the Reserve as an institution was "ripped" apart.¹⁴ The established members of the Reserve, particularly its NCOs and officers, were veterans of the active military and previous military campaigns. While these reservists were not anxious to go to war, they had strong ties to the military and substantial experience to draw upon when deployed to war zones. With the president's decision to withhold these forces, the Reserve became a refuge for the disaffected and a haven for those whose connections allowed them to avoid the draft. Divided internally and withheld from the battlefield, the Reserve's public image plummeted, and a critical link between the military and civilian spheres of American life was severed.

Total Force Policy

The individual who received the initial assignment to mobilize U.S. Army forces for the escalation of the Vietnam War without the Reserve was a legendary soldier, General Creighton Abrams. He also put in motion the policy that would restore the reputation of the Reserve and determine its fate to be a force deployed en masse to Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11. Already a highly decorated combat commander, Abrams

broke into the public consciousness in the winter of 1944 when the German army launched its last counteroffensive of World War II in the Ardennes, a plateau region of France. Elements of U.S. forces, including the 101st Airborne Division, were trapped in the town of Bastogne. Colonel Abrams led the 37th Tank Battalion of the U.S. Army, which broke through enemy lines, rescuing the American troops from certain defeat and playing a crucial role in halting the German army's last great offensive operation in Europe.¹⁵ He went on to command forces in the Korean War and in Europe during the 1950s and early 1960s. In 1964, General Abrams was promoted to army vice chief of staff; at the Pentagon, he oversaw the buildup of U.S. Army forces in Vietnam during the period of rapid escalation and commitment of American combat ground forces between 1965 and 1967. While he took pride in his job of strengthening the army under crisis conditions, Abrams felt that America had entered a war unprepared and failed to employ what he initially referred to as "one army" preparedness and later as "total force doctrine."

Our arrangement was that we would have one Army with certain things in the active force, others in the National Guard, and yet others in the Army Reserve. And if the unfortunate circumstance should occur that . . . we'd have to use the Army [then we would] use the active, the National Guard and the Reserve together. That's the only way [we would] do it. So all the maintenance, all of the supply, a lot of the medical—all of those things we've got to have, they're the reserve. . . . But somehow it didn't quite work out that way. Instead we [used] the Army in Vietnam *minus* the National Guard and the Army Reserve.¹⁶

After overseeing the buildup of the army to implement the president's decision to escalate American involvement in Vietnam and a five-year tour of duty in Vietnam, Abrams returned to Washington, D.C., in October 1972 as the army's chief of staff. One of his first assignments was to conduct a phased withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam. With the war ending in defeat and the draft terminated in 1973, Abrams reflected on the Vietnam experience and was in a position of power to act on his reflections. The Vietnam War reinforced his longstanding concerns about America's strong tendency to go to war unpre-

pared: "I can't help but be appalled at the human costs we've paid. . . . We've had to put [forces] together under the strain of emergency, and we've had to have relatively untrained men, led by relatively untrained men, do a very difficult task."¹⁷ The move to an all-volunteer army that relies substantially on a combat force of professional, active-duty soldiers would go a long way toward correcting this problem, assuming that the force was robust enough to meet civilian leaders' many demands on the military. However, Abrams had an additional concern that was far more politically delicate, given the axiom of American governance that ultimate authority over the military, including whether, when, and under what circumstances the United States will send troops into combat, rests with elected civilian authorities. Abrams, like many of his contemporaries, was deeply disturbed that President Johnson had decided to tiptoe America into the Vietnam War without the public's full awareness and commitment. He saw soldiers perform bravely and consistently under battlefield conditions but also witnessed growing difficulties he attributed to a reliance on conscription without public backing. He, like many of his contemporaries, witnessed defeat and the "explosive problems of dissent, drugs, racism and indiscipline" that became the army's defining features as the war ground to a halt.¹⁸

Based on their reflections on Vietnam, Abrams and his contemporaries regarded the mobilization of reserve forces as the crucial decision that must be taken any time America was contemplating engagement of its military in sustained combat. These leaders reasoned that failure to do so in Vietnam meant that escalation occurred without full public awareness and undermined public commitment to the war. One analyst of Abrams's moves to reconfigure military preparedness and force structure in the 1970s says that the general "believed that the liberal use of reserve forces in future conflicts would cause the American people to more quickly validate long-term and large-scale use of military forces. If validation was not forthcoming, one outcome would be fewer casualties and lower overall cost, with the emphasis on the former."¹⁹ While Abrams never publicly spoke about his intention to build a force structure that would check civilian authorities, there is little doubt that he intended to do so.²⁰ General John Vessey, who worked closely with Abrams during this period, recalls Abrams saying that America would

never again deploy a significant force without the mobilization of reserve forces and that by doing so, the armed forces would be restored as an “expression of the nation.”²¹ Lewis Sorley, General Abrams’s biographer, interviewed James Schlesinger, who served as secretary of defense when Abrams was reformulating the army’s force structure:

“There is no question but that Abrams was deliberately integrating reserve and active forces in that manner,” said James Schlesinger. [Sorley asked,] “Did that constitute a forcing function?” Schlesinger puffed his pipe, considering. “That would really not be like Abe,” he said. “He had the view that the military must defer to the civilians, even to an extraordinary degree. I speculate that the military sought to fix the incentives so that the civilians would act appropriately.”²²

Schlesinger endorsed Abrams’s plan to build a “total force” army that would initially have sixteen combat divisions, thirteen of active-duty forces and three “rounding out” divisions of highly trained National Guard combat units. Any support forces needed to maintain the army in the field for sustained combat, including medics, cargo handlers, maintenance and transportation personnel, and military police, would largely be the responsibility of the Reserve. Total force—commonly referred to as the Abrams Doctrine—became formal policy in 1973 when the general issued a letter to the U.S. Army’s thirteen field commanders. Abrams said that the army would move to a force structure of sixteen combat-ready divisions by 1978 and simultaneously bolster “the readiness and responsiveness of the Reserve Components, integrating them fully into the total force.”²³ Abrams died less than a month later, but his vision of the army remained the guiding principle for revitalizing its fighting capacity and public image.

Reserve Buildup and Readiness

Given the reserve forces’ low prestige in the eyes of the regular military after Vietnam and the sorry state of the reserves’ preparedness, the transition to total force practice was rocky in its formative years and was never fully tested until after 9/11. By the end of the 1970s, reserve

units' readiness fell well below military standards.²⁴ In October 1978, a secret Pentagon worldwide deployment exercise known as Nifty Nugget showed serious deficiencies not only in the number of trained reserve forces but in the logistics of pulling these reservists from their civilian-sector occupations.²⁵

During the 1980s, the Reagan administration launched the largest peacetime military buildup in U.S. history and rapidly expanded the amount of resources and number of personnel in both the active-duty and reserve components of the armed forces. By the end of the 1980s, military reservists and National Guardsmen constituted half of all trained military personnel.²⁶ A dramatic increase also occurred between 1980 and 1986 in the total number of reserve forces available for presidential call-ups. As the total force policy was put into place, the law initially limited the availability of reserve troops to fifty thousand personnel accessible under a presidential mobilization, but this would not last long. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter doubled that number, and in 1986 President Ronald Reagan doubled it again.²⁷ Consequently, as President George H. W. Bush entered the period of Desert Storm, or the first Gulf War in 1990, he had at his disposal up to two hundred thousand reservists who could be mobilized without the declaration of a national emergency.²⁸

But the Reserve and National Guard suffered a major setback in 1990–91 when President Bush decided to exclude the highly trained and motivated Army Reserve combat units from missions in Iraq, opting instead to mobilize fifty thousand combat support units.²⁹ This time, military leaders did not want the combat reserves, arguing that they were not fully ready.³⁰ Siding with the military leadership, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney stated the position of the first Bush administration: “The Guard and Reserve provide a very significant component for our military capacity . . . but I’m not eager to send units that aren’t fully ready.”³¹ In a turnabout from the Vietnam War, reserve components and some congressional leaders lobbied Cheney to send reserve force combat units to the Middle East in support of Operation Desert Storm/Desert Shield.³²

With the brevity of the Gulf War, the army’s reluctance to deploy combat units, and the fact that most combat support units operated

safely behind the lines of battle,³³ the U.S. military response to 9/11 turned out to be the first real-time test of the total force policy as both a military and a political manpower issue. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have required extended deployments of reserve combat and combat support forces, including the call-up of the 893rd Military Police Company. Along with professional soldiers, members of the Reserve and National Guard bear the burden of sacrifice for homeland security, the Iraq War, and the Afghanistan War. While most Americans continue life as normal, catching glimpses of the wars on the TV evening news, the lives of the citizen-soldiers have been taken over by total force policy.