
Defense Report

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The Secretary of Defense and Military Manpower Goals—He's Kidding Himself and the Public

In a recent interview with a national news magazine, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown was asked if reported shortfalls in recruiting indicated that the volunteer system is failing. The secretary responded that although the number of new recruits being brought into the services was falling 15 or 20 percent below planned goals the forces were still meeting overall strength targets because of high reenlistment rates. Two facts fly in the face of Dr. Brown's conclusion.

First, the Army will be at least 15,000 people below its authorized strength when all the reports are in for the fiscal year just ended. This represents the equivalent of almost a full division. At one point this year, in fact, Dr. Brown's own statisticians reported the Army almost 24,000 understrength. Second, the Defense Department and the Office of Management and Budget at the White House have, over the past several years, manipulated the planned strength of the Army to coincide with what they thought was achievable in the recruiting market, not what was needed.

Having to manage a shortage of this magnitude leaves the Army leadership with some very hard choices. They have chosen, for instance, to keep the units deployed overseas at 100 percent strength, achieving that by cutting back on the number of soldiers assigned to units at home. In the divisions here in the United States many combat battalions are operating with their companies short of the authorized number of platoons and with platoons that don't have all their squads. Armored battalions that should be able to put more than 50 tanks in the field go on maneuvers with 25 or 26 because they do not have enough crews. Secretary Brown sees only "potential difficulty" here.

The secretary did acknowledge concern for the poor state of manpower in the reserve forces. The role of the reserves has been made more crucial by conveniently shifting more responsibilities to them as the size and capabilities of the active forces have been reduced. Now, however, the Army Reserve, Army National Guard and Individual Ready Reserve are far below the numbers they need to adequately back up the Active Army in an emergency, and without an operable Selective Service mechanism there is no responsive source of manpower to fill the ranks.

Dr. Brown finds comfort in the disagreement over how quickly we might have to mobilize and how many troops we might have to commit to combat. It is more comfortable to him, to follow a scenario that envisions long warning time and a war that is over quickly. It is a scenario that flies in the face of military reality. To make mobilization plans on that kind of assumption will only raise the cost in lives if those plans are ever implemented.