



# With no alternatives, military's tribalism must go

BY JEFFREY PHILLIPS, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 11/11/18 02:00 PM EST  
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"There is only one Army. ... We cannot conduct sustained land warfare without the Guard and the Reserve," the Army's chief of staff, Gen. Mark Milley, has said. "It is impossible for the United States of America to go to war today without bringing Main Street."

Defense Secretary James Mattis, recently discussing with a [National Guard audience](#) what is called "the Total Force," told them they're "considered every bit as much a part of that force as any active element."

After nearly 20 years of (undeclared) war, you'd think the message had gotten through.

You'd be wrong.

After listening to Secretary Mattis (sincerely) declare his dedication to this total force, one Air National Guardsman spoke up: "One of the challenges that we face, both Army and Air, is older, outdated equipment. ... We got outdated [C-130] alpha models, and Blackhawks, and I can go over and over and over again — recapitalization to fighters, as well as ground pounders having the right equipment to keep them safe, fighting the fight."

The secretary was characteristically frank: "Obviously, the first out the door are the ones that are getting the front of the line."

Trouble is, even with recent [defense budget increases](#), the money seems infrequently to get beyond the front of the line. If there's a budget "plus-up," chances are, it'll plus up the active force.

The Pentagon can say, “Well, the defense budget funded what was requested.” The Navy Reserve recently requested a special variant of the Boeing 737, called the C-40A. The request appeared as an unfunded item, telegraphing its priority to Congress; effectively, the Navy didn’t ask for the airplane. (ROA succeeded in getting the airplanes authorized in the 2018 defense bill, but appropriators removed them.)

To that guardsman, the secretary said, “We’ll keep right on raising everyone, including the Strategic Reserve. And due to an absence of alternatives, the Strategic Reserve, which is critical to this nation, is heavily invested in all of you.”

“Strategic Reserve” traditionally describes a large pool of troops and equipment in varying states of readiness, intended essentially for use in “WW III.” Reservists drilled on weekends and for a couple weeks during the summer. The strategic reserve has existed since the Cold War — in essence since after the first world war; it’s the genesis of the “weekend warrior” tag affixed to reservists.

It’s also an identity distasteful to today’s leaders in the Reserve Components — the Reserve and National Guard: it connotes a disused, unready force. Today’s unending wars, global military presence and exorbitantly expensive Active Component (AC) have forced a new reality: the old strategic reserve has become the new operational reserve. With improved (but still insufficient) funding and increased readiness, it is used at a rate — “operational tempo” — that often rivals the AC, which, overtaxed by the demands placed on it, relies utterly on the Reserve Components (RC). One could ask, if it’s in constant and necessary use, is it a reserve?

As Secretary Mattis implied, “operationalizing” the Strategic Reserve is a necessity. And more money and time presumably will make it even readier to perform — in an absence of alternatives.

But the fundamental problem isn’t budgets. It’s vestigial disparities from the Strategic Reserve’s Cold War backbench role.

And it’s simple, if unintentional, tribal bias.

The military is run by its AC leaders (unlike the politically-appointed secretaries, the generals and admirals form a sort of cultural dynasty). Other than occasional service with leaders in the Reserve or Guard — a year here in Afghanistan, a week there on some exercise, a few minutes over there in a headquarters briefing — many AC leaders, who consequently may have developed high regard for a specific person or unit, may not fully understand or identify with the RC.

The AC and RC “tribes” don’t “come up” through the ranks together, go to military schools together (with few exceptions), or become close comrades together. Their families don’t commingle on base (the RC doesn’t live on base; by and large it lives, as Gen. Milley said, on Main Street).

This “tribal” effect can breed neglect or inequity in funding, policy, etc. It’s not malign, often inadvertent, and not even conscious; but it can drive unhelpful policies and decisions.

Here’s an example of inequity that affects readiness: Home from deployment, an Air Force reservist gets a VA prescription for PTSD. This triggers an Air Force [medical review](#), which very possibly will cause the reservist to be coded as [non-deployable](#). Yet his or her active duty comrade, getting the same drugs from a Department of Defense doctor, does not undergo the review. Why the difference?

In my next article, I'll cite some more examples of how this apparent bias plays out.

The effect is haves and have-nots within the military, eroding readiness. In the old strategic reserve days, this was less of an issue: the Reserve was used infrequently. But a total force that has seen nearly a million members of the Reserve and Guard mobilized since 9/11 isn't the old days.

Sure, members of the Reserve and Guard, deploying at unprecedented operational tempos (that show no sign of decreasing, regardless of "war is over" rhetoric), realize they may not get all the best new stuff, and may not get all the benefits of their active-duty comrades.

But especially when it comes to things that facilitate their performance as part of that Total Force, they rightly ask their share. And with their superb performance in a war that now spans two generations, they've earned it.

*Jeffrey Phillips is executive director of [ROA, dba Reserve Organization of America](#), open to all ranks and promoting a strong, ready reserve force. A retired U.S. Army Reserve major general, he served in the Regular Army for nearly 14 years.*

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