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# REPERCUSSIONS FROM THE VIETNAM MOBILIZATION DECISION

by

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*(Why didn't the United States mobilize for the Vietnam conflict? What were the repercussions of this decision? What must be done to improve mobilization procedures and readiness in the future?)*

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Historically, the Congress of the United States has been determined to avoid involvement in the conflicts of other nations. However, there have been several occasions when the Reserves or National Guard have been mobilized without a declaration of war. We need only look to the Mexican-American border dispute (1914-1918), Korea (1950-1953), Berlin (1961), and Cuba (1962) for examples. Even President Roosevelt, prior to World War II, had to use all of his political influence to block a Congressional resolution which would have required a national referendum to bring the United States into that conflict.<sup>1</sup>

The United States did not declare war during the Korean conflict; however, a major

mobilization of the Reserves and National Guard was initiated under the President's emergency authority for a call-up not to exceed one million men. He had to declare a national emergency to invoke it. These mobilization efforts were made palatable to the American public because the US forces were to be present in Korea under the auspices of the United Nations. Many of the personnel procedures used then were to be repeated later. This was to be the first major conflict in which large-scale use of individual replacements, even for mobilized units, was to occur. Many of the National Guardsmen who arrived in Korea with the units to which they were assigned did not remain with their units, but were reassigned as replacements in other units. This procedure, and the criticism it engendered, had a marked influence on the position taken by some members of Congress during later mobilization discussions.

In the summer of 1961 the Soviet Union precipitated a crisis over the status of control in Berlin. In order to meet this crisis and provide additional alternatives to massive retaliation, our general purpose forces were increased in size. In the process, approximately 148,000 personnel in Guard and Reserve units were ordered to active duty for one year or less. Even this partial mobilization was strongly debated in both houses of Congress.<sup>2</sup> President Kennedy could have declared a national emergency, but preferred to avoid the possibility that a huge mobilization would create panic in the United States and the Soviet Union. Instead, he requested that Congress enact a joint resolution providing him with the authority to call not more than 250,000 men—either individually or in units. The resolution was passed.

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During congressional hearings held the following year to extend the joint resolution authority, Chairman Russell expressed concern about the President's avoidance of a declaration of national emergency. He told the Secretary of Defense that: "We should broaden the base of those serving in the military forces of this country, and [see to it] that the obligations of defense should be as widely shared as is humanly possible to do so."<sup>3</sup> Chairman Russell mentioned that the Korean war was fought by veterans of World War II while millions of others were not called, and he considered it unfair. There was much discussion on this point and Senator Case recommended expanding the draft rather than calling the Reserves.<sup>4</sup> Chairman Russell then informed Secretary McNamara: "I want you to make it clear that you are not unnecessarily going to call up people who have already performed their duty, but to fill them [units] with draftees."<sup>5</sup> The extension of the joint resolution authority was approved for one additional year, but the total number authorized for call-up was reduced from 250,000 to 150,000 (approximately what was called for Berlin). This effort alerted the Defense Department to the unfavorable reaction by some senior members of Congress to mobilization in general; and the apparent acceptance of a major expansion of the draft to meet increased force requirements and to distribute the "burden" of service equitably. Some Congressmen still expressed support for a call-up in any emergency. During the 1962 hearings on the Joint Resolution, Senator Stennis made an important comment on the success of the Berlin mobilization:

General Clay testified before the preparedness subcommittee this spring. He was in Berlin a year ago, as everyone remembers, and he said the psychological advantage of a call-up over there was tremendous, not only to the West Berliners but to our adversaries.<sup>6</sup>

However, Secretary McNamara testified that the Reserves were not ready when called for Berlin:

We called up Reserve and Guard units [for Berlin], assuming that the number of men assigned to them were properly qualified, only to find out that in order to meet prescribed strength levels, strength objectives, they had accepted men through recruitment who were not qualified for the occupational specialties required for that particular type of unit.<sup>7</sup>

A small percentage of the Reserves were involuntarily recalled (as individuals) from non-drill status, and these fillers were the cause of most problems. *The Reserves had not been indoctrinated with the fact that they could expect to be called up at any time for any reason.*<sup>8</sup> [Emphasis added by the author of this article.]

It should be remembered that the armed forces had counted on mobilization of the Reserves and National Guard in any major conflict. In September 1964 General Curtis LeMay, Air Force Chief of Staff, in an article in *The Officer Magazine* entitled "The Use of Reserves in Future Crises," reviewed Air Force call-ups for Korea, Berlin, and Cuba. He alerted the Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard that they could expect to be called in any new emergency.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Army contingency planning was based upon the assumption that the commitment of a major portion of STRAF (Strategic Army Forces) would result in mobilization, and that the forces for sustained combat operations would be provided by the Reserves.<sup>10</sup> The military had anticipated and prepared for mobilization. However, during this period Secretary McNamara was again attempting to reorganize the National Guard and Reserve. The reorganization efforts plus the transfer of equipment to active units had a major impact on the mobilization readiness of the Army Reserves.

These are the circumstances which influenced the decision—with regard to mobilization as the United States became more and more involved in Vietnam; and these are the factors which led to the executive decision to override the recommendation of the senior military leaders to mobilize the Reserves and National Guard.

## THE DECISION

In 1965 President Johnson made the decision to increase the size of the armed forces for the Vietnam buildup by relying on the Selective Service System and the various officer recruitment programs, rather than by mobilizing the Reserves and the National Guard. There was a small mobilization of Reserves in 1968; however, all of the individuals were released by the end of 1969. The Vietnam mobilization decision was considered primarily in political terms. It was a case of military action being directed because there were no other actions which would be politically acceptable. A Joint Congressional Resolution had been proposed, similar to the one for the Berlin call-up, affirming support of the military action taken thus far in Vietnam and *eliminating the need for a Presidential Declaration of National Emergency*. It was hoped that an acceptance of the Resolution would be followed by support of the people.

But such acceptance did not materialize. There was no way of knowing what the total force requirements would be to assist the Vietnamese Government. There were no precedents; and it was soon learned that in a protracted, limited war, in which individuals rather than units are replaced, there's a tendency to underestimate the number of troops required. However, military leaders had warned of the costs and requirements in terms of men and time.

Sound estimates of the costs and requirements were available before the first U.S. combat troops were committed in March 1965. Both the Army Chief of Staff and Marine Commandant are on record in the early months of 1965 before our massive buildup in Vietnam, as estimating that the victory there would require 500,000 to 800,000 men and would take years of effort.<sup>11</sup>

The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) recommended that a Reserve call-up be considered. Admiral Moorer, Chairman of the JCS said: "McNamara and the Joint Chiefs

recommended calling up the Reserves, but there was no mobilization because of a political decision made by President Johnson."<sup>12</sup> General Wheeler, a former Chairman of the JCS, conceded that there were problems with mobilization. He said the Reserves could not be moved to combat in 90 days as was planned. They weren't ready and needed four months.<sup>13</sup> His statements weakened the argument for mobilization since draftees could be ready in almost the same time.

In the face of the testimony recommending a Reserve call-up, why then was there no mobilization for the Vietnam conflict? Was the Administration afraid of undermining public support for the Vietnam buildup? In retrospect, some of the factors which must have influenced the political decision were the adverse publicity from the Korean and Berlin call-ups; Secretary McNamara's ongoing attempts at reorganization of the Reserves and National Guard; and the lack of clothing, equipment, and training of Reserve and Guard units.

The use of draft and officer accession programs seemed to be the *easiest* way to achieve a major military buildup and to obtain the support of the public. New units were activated using career personnel as cadre. The Active Army received priority for the acquisition of equipment, and in some cases it drew needed equipment from the Reserve Components. Vietnam also received priority on the procurement of personnel, and many specialist personnel were Withdrawn from Europe and CONUS to fill vacancies in Vietnam. The attempt to achieve an economy of "guns and butter" during a period of a major military buildup forced the military and the State Department to compete with other national needs to obtain assets in order to meet all of the requirements. Other areas of the world where troops were often needed were left significantly undermanned.

The failure to achieve a quick and decisive victory or an early disengagement led to frustration and to its national concomitant—discontent. Many who were looking for a quick victory and a return to stability were dismayed when one monthly

draft call was followed by a larger call the following month. The large number of student and other deferments added to the requirement for younger and younger draftees

A review of the Congressional Records of 1965, 1966, and 1967 reveals that, except for some senior members, Congress was receptive to mobilization and could not understand why the Defense Department did not ask for it. Many Congressmen did not agree with the arguments against mobilization, nor with the idea that mobilization would be limited to a one-year call-up, as in the case of Berlin. During the Congressional Hearings on the 1966 Supplemental Appropriations, Senator Stennis challenged the decision as follows:

Let me say that it seems to me, Mr. Secretary [McNamara], that the argument that you didn't call the Reserves because it would only be for a year's service, is almost an argument to abolish the Reserves. . . .<sup>14</sup>

Secretary of Defense Laird, who was a Republican member of Congress from Wisconsin during this period and a member of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, sharply questioned the failure to mobilize. In his opinion, the failure to call up the Reserves was a political decision. In an exclusive interview with *US News & World Report* after becoming Secretary of Defense, he stated: "The decision in 1965 to use the draft to furnish much of the manpower for Vietnam was a mistake. It would have been better to call up the Reserve and National Guard to help fight the war."<sup>15</sup> In May 1966 Hanson Baldwin, military writer for *The New York Times*, recommended mobilization strongly in an article written for *The Reporter Magazine*, entitled "The Case for Mobilization." In his book, *Strategy for Tomorrow* (1970), he stated: "The penny-pinching war in Vietnam—an incredible performance for the wealthiest nation in the world—was, in major part, a product of the President's political failure to grasp the nettle of a war economy, to impose economic controls and to mobilize."<sup>16</sup>

Evidently President Johnson did not consider the decision on Reserve mobilization significant. It was not listed in his memoirs as one of the five critical decisions leading to the buildup in Vietnam.<sup>17</sup> The fact remains, however, that the failure to mobilize *did* affect our will of commitment, and *did* have a major and lasting impact upon our career armed forces. The burden of this decision would, in fact, be borne by the career military personnel in three significant areas.

### PERSONNEL REPERCUSSIONS

The three major areas in which personnel repercussions occurred because of the buildup of our armed forces without a mobilization to support that buildup were:

1. Army-wide individual and unit turbulence—drastic decreases in short tour turnaround time and assignment instability due to priority of personnel requirements for Vietnam;

2. Increased family separations for career personnel—with resulting pressures to leave the service; and

3. A deterioration of long established values in the Army.

*Army-wide Individual and Unit Turbulence.* General Westmoreland has stated that the Vietnam war ". . . has truly stretched the Army almost to its elastic limit."<sup>18</sup> The decision to rely mainly on the draft placed a great burden on the career soldier. The failure to mobilize combined with the one-year rotation policy in Vietnam meant that career officers and NCOs were transferred more frequently in order to equalize the short tours and to provide experience wherever needed throughout the Army. At the same time, company grade officers and junior NCOs moved with greater rapidity—from their initial schools to a few months in CONUS or Europe to a short tour, usually Vietnam. Assignment instability resulted in a great deal of dissatisfaction among many officers and NCOs, and their families. As the war dragged on, less time elapsed before the career soldier found himself repeating tours in Vietnam. Many career personnel left the service to look for higher-paying civilian jobs, thus causing

additional job turbulence for those remaining on active duty.

*Family Separations.* The personnel policies that were followed during the Vietnam conflict led to excessive family separations among the regular forces. The patience for which Army wives are known was stretched to the limit. My discussions with wives of Transportation Officers attending the Career Courses during the period July 1970 to July 1971 revealed that they would force their husbands out of the service if required to serve a third or fourth unaccompanied tour in Vietnam<sup>19</sup>—and the wife's influence is far greater than the young officer or NCO would dare to admit. But there were many officers who volunteered for return tours in order to fulfill a command tour or to otherwise enhance promotion opportunities. Naturally, this led to the usual problems of raising a family with the father absent. Then, to further complicate the problem, there was the public disapproval of the Vietnam involvement that touched the lives of many service families.

A Department of the Army study made in 1970 dealing with resignations of members of the Military Academy Class of 1966 lists the principal reasons for those officers leaving the service. Noteworthy is the fact that ". . . as a group, the resignees said they were leaving because of excessive family separations and the prospects of another tour in Vietnam."<sup>20</sup> As the war in Vietnam continued, the return of the career soldier to the combat area two, three, or even four times, resulted in a change in family attitudes from one of reluctant acceptance to one of bitter resentment. The phrase "You're not going again," changed from a question to a statement of fact in many Army homes.

*Deterioration of Long Established Values.* Personnel turbulence had the *most* direct impact on discipline in the Army. Supervision of subordinates suffered when leaders moved so rapidly that they did not have sufficient time to know their men, to instill a sense of responsibility in them, or to pursue necessary follow-up actions. Not only were the immediate and middle range leaders changing assignments rapidly, but many of the senior

leaders were being transferred frequently as well. In Vietnam leaders spent little time assigned to units, thus accomplishments were difficult to assess.

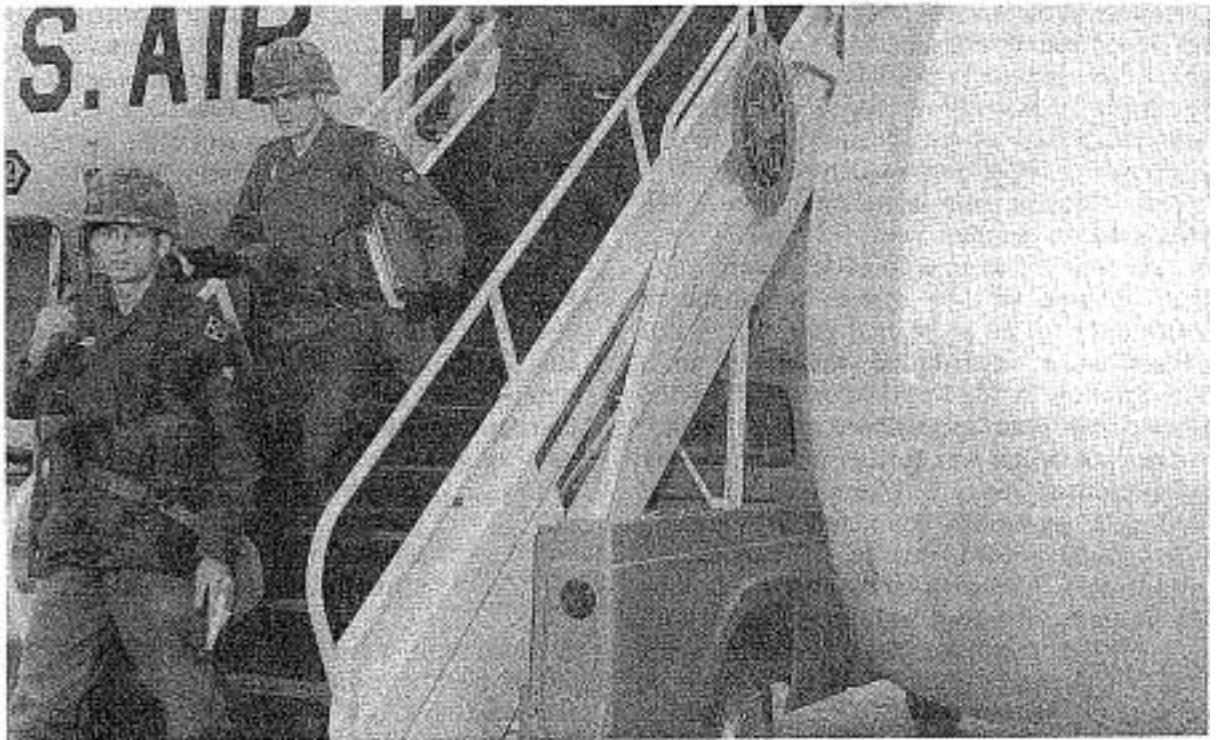
The requirement to draft large numbers of personnel when a war had not been declared resulted in a lowering of standards and the acceptance of waivers for military service. In some cases, men who had been in trouble in civilian life were accepted by the Army and they continued to cause disciplinary problems after they were inducted. High hopes were expressed for programs such as PROJECT 100,000, which was designed to accept men with slightly below standard qualifications. However, these programs were costly in terms of requiring direct, individual supervision by officers and NCOs at the expense of overall unit discipline. It is true that, in the short run, the restoration of discipline by the consistent punishment of the biggest offenders *will* adversely affect the so-called leadership indicators; i.e., disciplinary statistics. But the smart commander will recognize this fact and make allowances for it. Senior commanders *must* demand it.

One significant by-product of the failure to mobilize and to accepting volunteers and draftees was the fact that the Army filled its ranks with 19-year-olds. These youngsters brought with them the drug abuse problem being experienced today. A recent series of articles in *The Washington Post* described the impact of drugs in Vietnam, Europe and CONUS. This problem strongly affects the discipline and morale of the unit. An interview with LTC (Chaplain) John P. McCullagh, a witness in the 1970 hearings before the Senate Committee on Drug and Alcohol Abuse, indicates that the problem was not serious in Vietnam in 1966 or 1967 although the drugs were readily available.<sup>21</sup> However, his later experiences at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, led him to believe that the problem had become one of major proportions for the military. Many of the offenders had experimented before being drafted. He places the age of the abuser at less than 23 years—generally in his teens. Therefore, had mobilization occurred in 1965, 66, or 67, more mature men than the



*Homeward bound after a tour in Vietnam.*

US ARMY



*Returning to Vietnam—a second tour for some; a third tour for others.*

US ARMY

19-year-old draftee would have entered active duty at the lower enlisted and officer grades. This addition of maturity would have provided a settling influence and prevented the drug problem from becoming as significant as it did.

The failure to mobilize also affected the Army's professionalism as well. General Johnson, Army Chief of Staff, warned of this fact in 1966, although professionalism at that time was listed as outstanding.<sup>22</sup> The creation of many new units was effected by obtaining experienced cadres from existing resources. This led to a shortage of leaders in units and assignment instability for the troops and their leaders. Junior leaders were promoted quickly to fill vacancies; thus troops found themselves frequently with inexperienced, non-career personnel in positions of responsibility. Some senior officers lost confidence in our junior officers and NCOs. To minimize losses in their units, and to get the job done well, senior leaders had to dig into the ranks and be more detailed in their directions in order to make up for the inexperience of junior leaders and the turmoil caused by constant rotation of personnel. You must remember that most of the older senior officers had had 11 to 15 years of service as lieutenants before promotion. Many of today's lieutenant colonels served as lieutenants for 6 to 6 1/2 years before being promoted to captain. Yet, during Vietnam, our lieutenants were being promoted to captain with *two* years total service—and it was an automatic promotion at that, as long as they agreed to remain on active duty for an additional year. This set of circumstances contributed materially to a deterioration in the "professionalism" of the officer and noncommissioned officer corps.

Professionalism was further undermined by the personnel policy of giving most qualified officers a six-month command in Vietnam. This policy turned out to be particularly unfortunate. The pressure to get the job done was intense. Decisions were often made with an eye to short-run results, rather than taking into consideration the long-term effectiveness of the unit. Without mobilization, this policy was conceived to allow the career officer every opportunity for growth, including that

of command. If we had mobilized, officers in the Reserves and National Guard would have been kept in their units until rotation, thereby influencing the overall policy of six-month commands. There would have been sufficient pressure and Congressional interest in maintaining this unity for mobilized units because of the difficulties encountered in the Korean mobilization.

Assignment instability disrupted the chain of command and interfered with team performance. We had many outstanding individuals, but few, if any, outstanding teams where the personnel knew each other well. Through these procedures we lost the experience and professionalism of our officers and NCOs. One of the inevitable results of the personnel turmoil was the decrease in discipline and esprit de corps in our units. Perhaps the day is past for the charismatic leader of World War II, who could say:

From my officers, I demanded the utmost self-denial and a continued personal example, and as a result, the Army had a magnificent *esprit de corps*. There was never any collapse of morale among the German fighting troops, never any surrender due to apathy or fatigue. Discipline was always maintained and never had to be enforced even in the most terrible situations. (Comments by Field Marshall Rommel written as they occurred.)<sup>23</sup>

But we have relearned two lessons from our Vietnam experience. We have learned again that discipline, morale, and unit esprit deteriorate in a system which permits constant rotation of personnel, and that the professional officer or NCO is a product of a lifetime of study and experience.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NATIONAL GUARD AND RESERVES**

Since mobilization is our strategy, what are the implications for the National Guard and Reserves now that we are withdrawing from Southeast Asia and reducing our active forces? The withdrawal of US troops and the



reduction in active duty forces are leading to a significant reexamination of US military strategy. In this reexamination the need to mobilize in the future is being declared as national defense policy. In late 1971 Secretary of Defense Laird, in a speech to the Association of the US Army in Washington, D.C., and also in an interview with *US News & World Report*, stressed the new policy of "realistic deterrence" in which the National Guard and Reserves will be subject to call. He also stated that greater reliance will be placed upon our allies for military support.

But we're [the United States] going to have to make do with less military manpower, and that is why we're stressing the total force concept in planning for a realistic deterrent during the 1970s. That means, as I have said, that we must place a greater reliance upon our Reserve and National Guard, and they must understand that they will be called and used as a quickly available source of manpower to augment the active forces if we have a military emergency.<sup>24</sup>

The timing of the response in a future emergency will be critical. It has been said that:

The United States is supposed to be ready to provide within thirty days or so seven more divisions to NATO, in addition to the equivalent of more than five divisions maintained in Europe. This is a "paper" obligation; the United States has not been capable of meeting this commitment since 1965.<sup>25</sup>

We must address our problems in this area carefully. There are many difficulties associated with mobilization—particularly the capability and national will to accomplish it. In Hanson Baldwin's opinion, Russia was at one time very slow.

...but, today the USSR's category 2 and category 3 divisions, those maintained in peacetime at reduced strength or in cadre

form, can be fleshed out, equipped and ready for combat, considerably faster than the West's reserve divisions.<sup>26</sup>

The Swiss are prepared to mobilize within 48 to 72 hours, and all males (with few exceptions) receive military training. The Israeli mobilization policy is similar to Switzerland's. They rely on the citizen soldier. Mobilization response is automatic, with 48-hour readiness and a concept for the short war.<sup>27</sup> The question is whether or not the United States has a similar mobilization capability.

A realistic appraisal of our mobilization concept is an absolute necessity. Are we prepared to mobilize every few years, and do we have the national will to do so? Will mobilization create greater dangers through increased tension among the major powers? How large should the active duty strength be, and will the Reserves be adequately trained and equipped? Will political decisions dictate any major changes creating additional turbulence in Reserve units? There has been much pressure within the Congress to retain individuals within their mobilized units. Future call-ups will be made with this in mind. Will we experience the same difficulties the French had with their reservists during the Algerian war? Although the active forces were not involved, incidents were widespread among the reservists going to war in Algeria. These incidents included train disruptions and anti-war parades.<sup>28</sup>

What steps are being taken to insure mobilization response? One step that should be taken now is to select, equip, train, and ready for quick deployment a force of selected Army Reserve and National Guard units prior to any further major strength reductions of the Active Army. These units should identify with active duty units, at least at the battalion and brigade level. Officer and NCO exchange programs should be established. Active duty units should select briefing teams to provide information to, and to show an interest in, National Guard and Reserve personnel and their dependents.

If the number of active duty divisions is reduced, the capability must exist for

immediate mobilization. This capability has not existed for Army units in the recent past. To be realistic and credible our Reserves and National Guard units must:

1. Be educated in the need for mobilization;
2. Be prepared for individual disruption—and possible disruption of the local economy due to the mobilization of key personnel;
3. Be ready for immediate mobilization and movement to a combat or training area;
4. Be trained for mobilization—at first announced, later unannounced;
5. Be prepared to reorganize quickly and easily to remain compatible with active forces; and
6. Be equipped with standardized weapons and equipment.

### SUMMARY

The unfavorable reaction to mobilization by a few senior members of Congress following the call-up in connection with the Berlin mobilization alerted the Defense Department to the apparent acceptance of the draft as the tool to increase our armed forces. These members of Congress questioned the wisdom of mobilization during the Korean war—a major mobilization effort—because it meant that those who had already sewed their country were serving again. This reaction strongly influenced the thinking within the Executive Department and the Department of Defense.

The decision to increase our armed forces during the Vietnam buildup through the Selective Service System and officer recruitment programs caused significant long-term personnel repercussions, particularly for the career military personnel. The failure to mobilize the Reserves and National Guard meant that the career officer and NCO bore the burden of long-term assignment instability, and of repetitive unaccompanied tours overseas. The decision resulted in personnel repercussions of Army-wide individual and unit turbulence, increased family separations, and a deterioration of discipline during a time of

increasing national dissension. A return to assignment stability is essential to overcome the dissatisfaction of career military personnel and their families.

Prior to the Vietnam buildup senior military leaders planned for, and openly spoke of, mobilization in the event of any major US military effort. Testimony during the early Congressional hearings indicated that not only had the senior military leaders recommended mobilization, but that many members of Congress could not understand the decision against mobilization. The political results of that decision are still being debated.

The United States is now withdrawing from Vietnam and reducing the size of our armed forces. Mobilization of the Reserves and National Guard is again stated as a strategy in the event of future buildup. To be effective, however, much improvement in readiness in the Reserves and National Guard is required to overcome the years of neglect as a result of personnel and equipment priorities going to the active forces. We need to develop and rehearse procedures which will provide for the timely activation and integration of Reserve and National Guard forces with the active duty forces. No further reductions in the US active forces should occur until the officers and men of the Reserves and National Guard have the capability and will to respond to immediate mobilization. The threat has not decreased. Therefore, we can no longer afford to pay lip service to our policy of mobilization.

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