



What is an Operational Reserve?

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In the last several years there has been a great deal of talk about the Reserve Components shifting from being primarily a “strategic reserve”— an expansion force and repository of forces to be called upon during a national crisis — to more of an “operational reserve” that is more integrated in day-to-day military operations and also participates at a higher level in operational missions.¹ The term “operational reserve” has come to be used extensively within the Department of Defense (DoD), the different Services, and even in public dialogue. As shown in Figure 1 below, the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) Report² even calls for the Reserve Components to be “operationalized.” More recently, the Commission on the National Guard and Reserves (CNGR) provided an interim report to Congress that concludes “DoD has declared that we have an operational reserve without also making the changes necessary to ensure that such a change is sustainable.”³ The CNGR makes several observations and concludes that “we believe that the current posture and utilization of the National Guard and Reserve as an ‘operational reserve’ is not sustainable over time...”⁴

There has been a lot of talk about the operational reserve, but up until now no one has officially defined what an operational reserve is, how it is to be used and resourced or the expectations that go along with the employment of an operational reserve. Therefore, the term operational reserve has evolved to mean different things to different people. This article proposes a first step — a DoD definition for the operational reserve as it relates to the increased reliance on and utilization of the Reserve Components, while also recognizing and retaining the unique relationship that each of the Reserve Components has with its parent Service.

Because it is so frequently used, one would think that you could at least find operational reserve in Joint Publication 1-02 (JP 1-02), the military’s official dictionary. You can, and it is defined as “operational reserve — An emergency reserve of men and/or materiel established for the support of a specific operation” which only has meaning in a tactical sense.⁵

However, it has no contemporary meaning as it relates to the increased reliance on and utilization of the Reserve components.

In July 2006 the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) published a study titled “The Future of the National Guard and Reserves” as Phase III of its Beyond Goldwater-Nichols Project. One major finding was that for the Services, particularly the Army, “employing the Reserve Component as part of the operational force is mandatory, not a choice.”⁶ CSIS also recommended that “if the Reserve Component is not re-envisioned to support the significant role it is being asked to play as part of the operational force, it will begin to falter— the question is merely when this will start to happen.”⁷ A fundamental aspect of this “re-envisioning” requires DoD to define what it expects of its Reserve

Quadrennial Defense Review Report

The traditional, visible distinction between war and peace is less clear at the start of the 21st century. In a long war, the United States expects to face large and small contingencies at unpredictable intervals. To fight the long war and conduct other future contingency operations, joint force commanders need to have more immediate access to the Total Force. In particular, the Reserve Component must be operationalized, so that select reservists and units are more accessible and more readily deployable than today. During the Cold War, the Reserve Component was used, appropriately, as a “strategic reserve,” to provide support to Active Component forces during major combat operations. In today’s global context, this concept is less relevant.

Figure 1. Passage from the Quadrennial Defense Review Report⁸

Components, and defining the operational reserve is central to this task.

For the past year the Office of the Assistants to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff for National Guard and Reserve Matters and the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, along with the Reserve Components and other stakeholders, have worked together to develop a commonly accepted definition for operational reserve. This proposed definition is provided in Figure 2 below.

A Proposed DoD Definition for Operational Reserve

Operational Reserve: The total Reserve Component structure that operates across the continuum of military missions performing both strategic and operational roles in peacetime, wartime, contingency, domestic emergencies, and homeland defense operations. As such, the Services organize, resource, equip, train, and utilize their Guard and Reserve Components to support mission requirements to the same standards as their active components. Each Service's force generation plan prepares both units and individuals to participate in missions, across the full spectrum of military operations, in a cyclic or periodic manner that provides predictability for the combatant commands, the Services, service members, their families, and civilian employers.

Figure 2. A Proposed DoD Definition for the Term Operational Reserve

This proposed definition is sufficiently specific. It meets the intent of the 2006 QDR and it is compatible with subsequent guidance set forth in the Secretary of Defense's "Utilization of the Total Force" memorandum of 19 January 2007.⁸ The key aspects of this definition are that the Reserve Components are actively engaged and thus must be organized, resourced, equipped, and trained (to the same standards as their active components) by the Services for full spectrum missions in a predictable cycle.

Additionally, this definition is not so specific that it would be incompatible with any individual Service, existing Reserve Component culture, or their force generation plan. For example, this definition works well to describe how the Army National Guard and Army Reserve perform as an operational reserve for the Army. As such, both of the Army's Reserve Components function as an integral part of its Army Force Generation (ARFORGEN) model, which is conducted for the most part under partial mobilization authority. The Army likes to refer to its Reserve Components as an "operational force" and says that "ARFORGEN supports the transition of Reserve Component units from a strategic reserve to an operational force."⁹ More recently the Army Secretary and Chief of Staff developed seven Army initiatives, with initiative #4 seeking to "Complete [the] Reserve-

Component transition to an operational force..."¹⁰ All of these Army actions and initiatives are consistent with this proposed DoD definition for operational reserve.

This definition also serves well to explain how the Air Force uses its Reserve Components as an operational reserve in the context of the Air Expeditionary Force, whereby it achieves greater availability and access to a subset of their Reserve Components largely through voluntary means. Likewise, this definition works well for both the Navy Reserve and Marine Corps Reserve who are well integrated with their parent Services and are already accustomed to expeditionary operations.

Now more than ever, the Reserve Components are an integral part of our national defense. It is unrealistic for them to be asked to perform as an operational reserve, and hold their parent Services responsible for ensuring this, without DoD better defining what an operational reserve is and how it can be utilized. Adopting the DoD definition offered in this article provides a common reference point and focus within DoD, the Services, and even in the ongoing public dialogue so that this nation can properly identify and then truly achieve an operational reserve. **R&NG**

1. Office of the Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs White Paper, "The New Guard and Reserve." November 6, 2006, pages 2-3, available at <https://ca.dtic.mil/jcs/ngrm/ftp/NewGuardReserve.doc>. Note that this website must be viewed from a ".mil" domain computer.
2. Department of Defense "Quadrennial Defense Review Report." February 6, 2006, pages 76-77, available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/qdr/report/Report20060203.pdf>.
3. Commission on the National Guard and Reserves, Second Report to Congress, March 1, 2007, pages X and 38, available at <http://www.cngr.gov/Worddocs/March%201%20Report/CNGR%20Second%20Report%20to%20Congress%20.pdf>.
4. Ibid. The 'operational reserve' quote in this report may even be a subtle hint to DoD that, despite the testimony of many leaders within the DoD, the CNGR still does not have a clear understanding of this term.
5. Joint Publication 1-02, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, 12 April 2001 (as amended through 14 September 2007), page 395, available at http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf.
6. The Future of the National Guard and Reserves, July 2006, Center for Strategic and International Studies, pages IX, 7-9, available at http://www.csis.org/media/isis/pubs/bgn_ph3_report.pdf.
7. Ibid, page VIII.
8. Secretary of Defense memorandum subject: Utilization of the Total Force, dated 19 Jan 07, available at https://ca.dtic.mil/jcs/ngrm/ftp/gates_tfp_policy_memo_19jan07.pdf. Note that this web site must be viewed from a ".mil" domain computer.
9. 2007 Army Posture Statement, Addendum H (Army Force Generation), available at <http://www.army.mil/aps/07/addendum/h.html>.
10. "Visiting the Troops" by Jeremy S. Buddemeier, Soldiers Magazine, July 2007, Volume 62, Number 4, pages 4-5, available at <http://www.army.mil/publications/soldiersmagazine/pdfs/jul07all.pdf>.