

THE U.S. RESERVE COMPONENT: AN OPERATIONAL FORCE

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ABSTRACT

In the United States, the reserve component has always held a key role in the defence apparatus, although its role has evolved over time. While it was seen for a long time as a strategic reserve for use in the event of major conflicts, after the Vietnam War it became a flexible and responsive operational force working in tandem with active units.

While the term “reserve” is often indiscriminately used, there is a noteworthy difference between the Reserve, under federal status, and the National Guards, which are dependent on US states and territories. This dual structure, the product of history and a delicate balance between local and federal echelons, may sometimes seem complex and ill-suited to the challenges that the US military faces today.

As equipment, missions and training have become increasingly similar between the two reserve components, it would be legitimate to raise the question of simplifying the current system in view of merging the two. Nonetheless, such an outcome is unlikely, as the current model is based on two premises: the clear separation of federal and local prerogatives and the significant role held by the National Guard and the citizen-soldier in the American collective consciousness.

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INTRODUCTION

France is today facing the most unprecedented threat to its territory since the end of the Cold War, due to an increase in terrorist attacks beginning in January 2015. The question of the military's role, in particular that of the reserve component, in the response to this new strategic challenge, is pertinent. A recent Senate report recommended that the country should have a “strong, locally-organised military reserve to handle crises”.¹

The idea, which had been envisaged for several months already, of recreating a national guard in France using the reserves was made official by a meeting of the Council of Ministers on 12 October 2016. It would therefore be wise to look at how the reserve component, mainly made up of the National Guards, is organised and employed in the United States.

Without forgetting history's influence and the difference in how French and American institutions are structured, it is of note that the reserve component has a key role in the American defence apparatus, as a flexible and responsive operational force working in tandem with active units.

This paper therefore aims to provide an overview of the US reserve components and their structure as well as how they are employed. Returning to the development of the reserve's role, the paper will then analyse the advantages of this complex system, which needs simplifying, but which helps uphold the relationship between soldier and state.

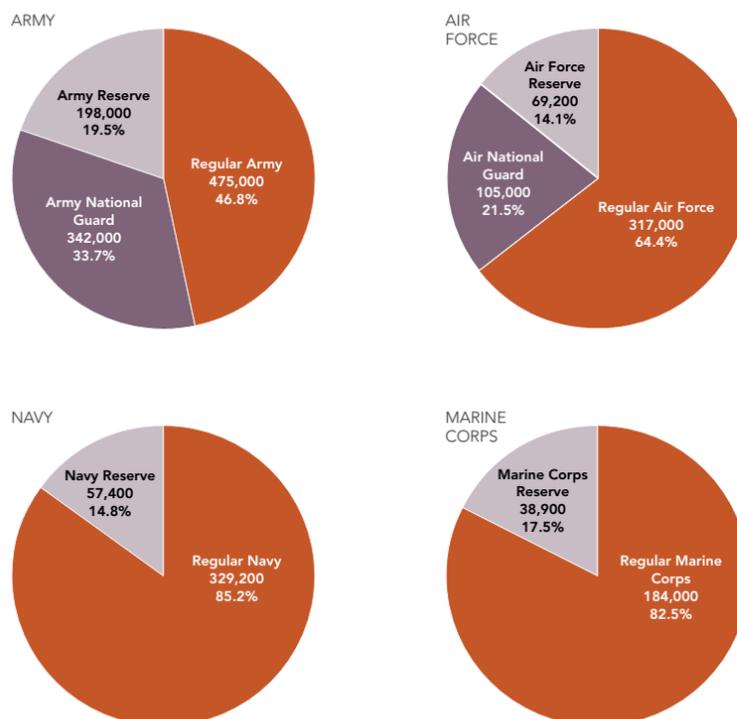
THE RESERVE COMPONENT IN THE UNITED STATES

The US armed forces, which include the Army, the Air Force, the Navy and the Marine Corps, are made up of two components: one active and one reserve. Active soldiers work full time in the military, whereas reserve personnel mostly serve part time, but may be called to serve in times of emergency.

The word “reserve” is often used indiscriminately to refer to the seven reserve components which are the Army National Guard, the Army Reserve, the Navy Reserve, the Marine Corps Reserve, the Air National Guard, the Air Force Reserve and the Coast Guard Reserve.² However, it is important to distinguish between those entities that are under the control of states – the Army National Guard and the Air National Guard – and the five others, which are exclusively under federal authority. The US Army and the US Air Force are the only armed forces with a reserve³ component divided into a Reserve and a National Guard.⁴ Inversely, the Navy and the Marine Corps only have a federal reserve. There is therefore no National Guard for the Navy and the Marine Corps.⁵

The ratio of active troops to reserve troops varies depending on the force. The Navy and the Marine Corps are the two armed forces with the least number of reservists, where they account for less than 15 and 18% of personnel. Inversely, for the US Army, the reserve component represents over half of its personnel (53.2%). The Army is in fact made up of its permanent base, the Regular Army, together with the reserve and National Guard personnel, who may be ordered temporarily to active duty depending on operational requirements. In November 2015, for example, the US Army had 553,000 personnel on active duty,⁶ made up of 491,000 active soldiers, and 46,000 permanently active National Guard and Reserve personnel, as well as 16,000 National Guard members and reservists that had been called to active duty temporarily.

Breakdown of active and reserve personnel in each force - 2016



Source: National Commission on the Future of the Army, [Report to the President and the Congress of the United States](#), 28 January 2016, p. 62.

The National Guard

The National Guard is composed of the Army National Guard-ARNG and the Air National Guard. The ARNG was formerly a colonial era militia that existed even before the US Constitution was adopted. The constitution recognises the existence of the militia and declares it to be the founding element of the US Armed Forces. This militia, initially destined to “execute the laws of the Union, suppress insurrections and repel invasions”,⁷ would see its role and relationship to the federal state progressively evolve. In 1933, the ARNG became an integral part of the Army reserve component. As both a state and a federal entity, it is made up of fifty four National Guards, one for each of the fifty states, and the National Guards of the three territories (Puerto Rico, Guam, Virgin Islands) and the District of Columbia⁸. They are directly controlled by the governors or the president in the unique case of the federal capital.⁹

The ARNG is made up mostly of reserve personnel that are called on for regular training periods, generally one weekend a month and two weeks a year. Permanent personnel provide daily support for these units; they represent 17% of all personnel.¹⁰ Initially intended to carry out population support missions in emergency situations, under the authority of their governor, the ARNG units can also be called up by the federal echelon in a serious crisis. The term ARNG is used when they are under the governor’s authority and ARNGUS-Army National Guard of the United States¹¹ when these units are under federal authority.

More recently, the Air National Guard was set up in September 1947, at the same time as the US Air Force, by the National Security Act. It contributes to several missions on the national territory, particularly for the protection of US air-space.

The reserve with federal status

This reserve is made up of the various Reserve entities of each military force. They were created throughout the 20th century: the US Army Reserve in 1908, the US Navy Reserve and the Marine Corps Reserve in 1916, the Coast Guard Reserve in 1941 and the Air Force Reserve in 1947. If we take the example of the US Army Reserve-USAR, today its composition is mainly in the form of support units, unlike the ARNG where there are both combat and support units. There are also permanent personnel which make up 14% of all personnel.¹² The purpose of each reserve is to “provide trained units and qualified persons available for active duty in the armed forces, in time of war or national emergency, and at such other times as the national security may require, to fill the needs of the armed forces whenever more units and persons are needed” (U.S. Code Title 10 § 10102).¹³

All reservists, whether in the Reserve or the National Guard, fall under one of the following three categories: the Ready Reserve, the Standby Reserve or the Retired Reserve.¹⁴

The first to be called on is the Ready Reserve, which is the biggest of the reserve component in terms of manpower. It is divided into three sub-groups: the Selected Reserve, the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) and the Inactive National Guard (ING). The Selected Reserve is made up of units and personnel deemed essential in the event of grave crisis. They are called on first and must train regularly, at least one week-end a month¹⁵ and two weeks a year.¹⁶ The IRR meanwhile is made up of federal reservists who have received previous military training, either as formerly active duty personnel or as former reservists in the Selected Reserve. They are not obligated to follow regular training and can be called on in any situation. Lastly, the ING is the IRR's equivalent in the National Guard. While under no obligation to train regularly, they are however members of a specific unit of the National Guard, where they must check in once a year. They are only called to serve in the event of partial or general mobilisation.

The Standby Reserve¹⁷ is made up of personnel who are temporarily inapt for duty, and also those who hold key civilian positions within the American defence apparatus. They are not subject to any training obligations and can only be called for duty in the event of general mobilisation.

The Retired Reserve is made up of reserve personnel who are qualified to receive a retirement pension following their career in the reserve. They can also be called for duty in the event of a general mobilisation.

THE ROLE OF THE RESERVE COMPONENT

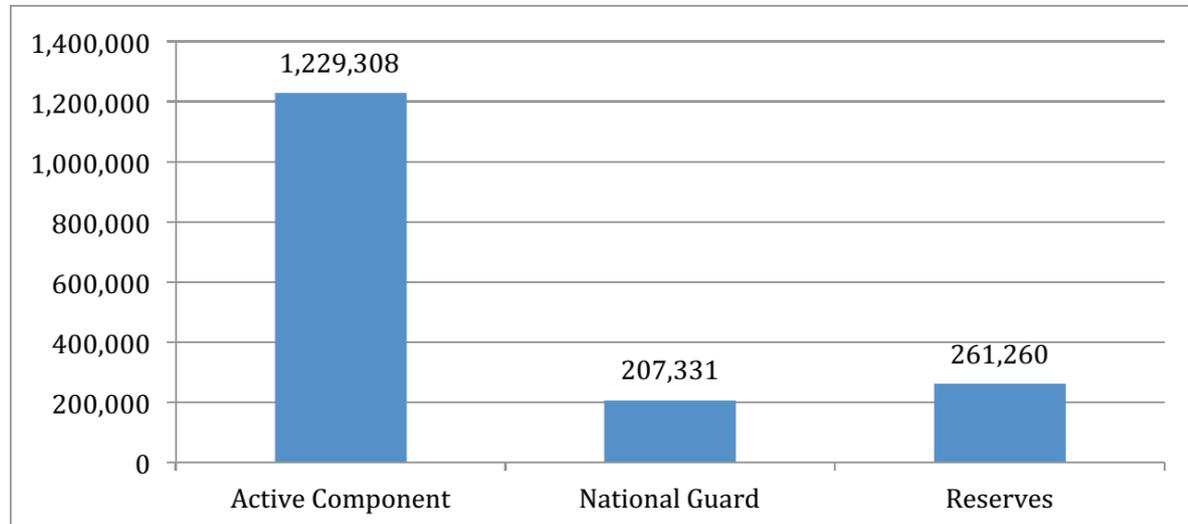
American society has always been naturally distrustful of the permanent armed forces;¹⁸ they are seen to pose a threat to civil liberties.¹⁹ The reserve component, temporary by nature, has therefore always played a significant role in the American defence apparatus. Since the founding of the United States, there have been cycles of inflation and deflation of military personnel according to necessity. The active duty component, weak in peacetime, would increase its manpower in times of crisis, initially by mobilising the reserves and the National Guard, then by recruiting supplementary active staff, and finally through conscription. Once the crisis passed, the active personnel were drastically reduced in order to maintain a minimal structure which would be the basis for a newly constructed force for the following crisis. The bulk part of the force was therefore the reserve component, particularly in the National Guard, made up of citizen soldiers descended from the first militia members.

From strategic reserve to operational force

The role of the reserve component has evolved over time. For a long time it was seen as a strategic reserve, especially during the Cold War, which could strengthen and bolster the active forces in the event of a major conflict. The reserve units were not given priority when resources were allocated, and had between 65-74% of available staff and 65-79% of available equipment. Once the mobilisation was made definite, most of these units would have a long build-up period in which they could recover their staff and equipment and carry out the necessary training.

The reserve component's role changed in the early 1970s. The drop in personnel following the end of the Vietnam War, the suspension of conscription, the diminishing budgets and the lessons learned from not using the reserves in the Vietnamese conflict could explain this change of model. The Total Force Policy established in 1973 by Defence Secretary James Schlesinger therefore aimed to incorporate "active duty forces, the National Guard and the Reserve into a homogenous whole".²⁰ They would thereafter be used to strengthen the active units. From a strategic reserve, the purpose of the reserve component from then on was to transition to an operational force to work together with the active component. In the Army's case, this change of concept was immediately implemented by General Creighton Abrams, the Chief of Staff from 1972 to 1974. The reserve and active forces became equally integrated to the point where it became difficult to conduct a large-scale operation without calling on the reserve component. The first test for the integrated US Army model took place during the First Gulf War (1990-1991), when 238,729 soldiers from the reserve component were called to duty.²¹ The September 11 attacks in 2001 and the ensuing operations in Afghanistan (2001-2014) and Iraq (2003-2011) would once more bring the reserve component into the spotlight. The US military would not have been capable of keeping up with the rotations on both theatres without the Reserve and National Guard units. At the peak of their employment in 2004, the reserve units represented over 33% of US troops present in Iraq.²²

Members of the armed forces deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, 2001-2008



Source: Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

The mobilisation process

In a federal mobilisation, three cases that are strictly governed by law are possible, as outlined in detail in the following table.²³

Status	Authority	Reason	Troops mobilised	Duration	Personnel concerned
<p>10 U.S.C 12 301 (a) Full mobilization</p>	Congress	War or national emergency (e.g. Second World War)	Unlimited	For the duration of the war or for emergency situations plus six months	All reserve personnel (Ready Reserve Standby Reserve, Retired Reserve)
<p>10 U.S.C 12 302 Partial mobilization</p>	President	National emergency (e.g. Operation Iraqi Freedom)	No more than 1 million reserve personnel mobilised.	No more than 24 consecutive months	All reserve personnel in the Ready Reserve
<p>10 U.S.C 12 304 Presidential Reserve Call-Up</p>	President	In order to increase the active forces for operations or in support for certain emergency situations.	No more than 200,000 reserve personnel mobilised.	No more than 365 days	Only members of the Selected Reserve and the Individual Ready Reserve

Concerning members of the National Guard, they may also be called to serve by their State or territory governor in the event of a serious crisis. In this situation each State finances the decision. Some governors mobilised their National Guard just after 11 September 2001 in order to protect sensitive infrastructures.²⁴ In certain cases, the mobilised soldiers remain under the authority of their governor, although they are federally financed. In this case, they are employed under Title 32 status.

National Guard units are known for their contributions in the event of natural catastrophe, for example in 2005 in Louisiana following Hurricane Katrina, or in the event of public unrest, such as the riots in Los Angeles in 1992. Nonetheless, they can also play a role in protecting the national territory. After the 11 September attacks in 2001, the United States decided to strengthen its border control. The US Border Patrol, whose mission is to detect and prevent illegal immigration, in particular along the Mexican border, grew in service members from 9,736 in 2001 to almost 18,319 in 2009. It took a certain amount of time to recruit and train these new agents.²⁵

For this reason, President George W. Bush decided in May 2006, at the request of four governors of US-Mexico border states,²⁶ to launch Operation Jump Start (OJS), for which members of the National Guard provided support for two years to the Border Patrol services until the new recruits arrived. This resulted in the deployment of 6,000 soldiers along the southern border. Almost 30,000 members of the National Guard took part in this operation, providing air, technical, logistics and administrative support. Serving under Title 32 of the USC, the National Guard units that took part remained under the authority of their respective governors, although they received federal funding. Terminating in July 2008, this was a unique operation as for the first time the Army National Guard and the Air National Guard participated jointly in great numbers in a major operation on the US national territory for an extended period. This did generate certain difficulties, however, namely in order to create unity of effort due to the very differ-

ent institutional cultures and the problems establishing a joint effort in terms of information-sharing.

This example illustrates the restrictive legal framework that limits the use of the armed forces on the American soil. Due to the restrictions laid out by the Posse Comitatus Act, a federal law dating to 1878, the National Guard soldiers funded by the federal echelon could only act in support of the Border Patrols, and in no circumstances on the frontline of operations. This law, the purpose of which was to limit the use of federal troops on US soil, prevents them from participating in police missions, unless they receive authorisation from Congress. However, the law does not apply to the Army National Guard and the Air Force National Guard when they are under State authority.²⁷ This allows them to participate in policing operations at the governor's request. It was for this reason that the Missouri National Guard was sent to Ferguson in 2014 following the race riots.

A COMPLEX SYSTEM IN NEED OF REFORM

The United States reserve component's structure, the product of history and a delicate balance between local and federal echelons, may sometimes seem complex and ill-suited to the challenges that the US military faces today. While the active component was majorly reformed in 1986 with the Goldwater-Nichols Act, the reserve component has not experienced any significant reform since the end of the Korean War²⁸, despite its transformation into an operational reserve. The Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts reiterated the need for a certain number of systemic reforms, which were outlined in the report by the Commission on the National Guard and Reserves in 2008.

Nonetheless, any reform on the subject is a particularly sensitive issue and even more difficult to implement as it has an impact on contradictory interests. The issue is in fact a good example of the constant power balance between the local and federal levels in the United States. On the one hand, the governors jealously defend their prerogatives in the domain and refuse any resource diminishment of their State units. On the other, the active component might use the reserve as an adjustment variable, by attempting for example to offload some of the personnel cuts onto the reserve and particularly the ARNG, which never fails to spark tensions.²⁹

That said, there is nonetheless a clear consensus on the central role of the reserve component in the defence structure.³⁰ The reserve component is indeed characterised by its flexibility of use. Its units can be rapidly called up in a crisis and have specific capabilities, which are not always necessarily available in the active component. They also have the significant advantage, in a constrained financial context, of being less costly. An off-duty reservist costs approximately four times less than an active service member. The difficulty resides in finding the right balance between active and reserve personnel in a complex and evolving strategic environment, as we can see in the table below which provides the example of the US Army since the end of the Cold War.

Examples of percentages of active and reserve components for the US Army

(K=thousands; M=millions)

Year	AC Levels	RC Levels	AC % of force mix	RC % of force mix	Total Size of Army
1989 (end of the Cold War)	770 K	776 K	49.1%	50.1%	1.546 M
Sept 11, 2001	480 K	555 K	46.4%	53.6%	1.035 M
2010 (peak Army strength related to wars in Iraq and Afghanistan)	570 K	564 K	50.3%	49.7%	1.134 M
FY2015 Budget Request	490 K	552 K	47.0%	53.0%	1.042 M
Army proposal for FY2017 ("smallest acceptable force")	450K	530K	45.9%	54.1%	980K
Army proposal for FY2019 ("worst case scenario")	420K	500K	45.6%	54.4%	920K

Source: Feickert, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

The presence across the US of National Guard units is also a sign of the reserve component's strength. The dual federal and local mandate and the presence of National Guard units across the American soil mean it has a strong response capability in the event of serious crisis. Since the end of conscription in the United States, this territorial presence has contributed, among other things, to maintaining the soldier/state relationship.³¹ The Reserve and the National Guard are mainly made up of citizen soldiers who live and work in a civilian environment, creating a natural link with those who have never served in uniform. In the event of crisis, they are the first responders to assist their neighbours and colleagues. The reserve component therefore has proven to be a fundamental element in the smooth upkeep of relationships between the military and the rest of American society, helping avoid a chasm from forming between civilian societies and career military personnel.³²

The transformation of the reserve component into an operational reserve brought these two worlds, the National Guard and the federal-status Reserve, closer. As equipment, missions and training have become increasingly similar between the two reserve components, it would be legitimate to raise the question of simplifying the current system in view of merging the two. Unsurprisingly, such an eventuality would be stonewalled by the many supporters of the current model, which, though highly complex, is founded on two postulates: the clear separation of federal and local prerogatives, and the key role given to the National Guard, the citizen-soldier descended from the first militia, in the American collective consciousness.

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Notes

¹ Jean-Marie Bockel & Gisèle Jourda, "[Garde nationale](#)": *une réserve militaire forte et territorialisée pour faire face aux crises*, Information report conducted on behalf of the French Senate's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces Commission, 793, 2016.

² The Coast Guards are under the authority of the Department of Homeland Security in peacetime, but in wartime this changes to the Department of Defense.

³ Army Reserve and Air Force Reserve.

⁴ Army National Guard and Air National Guard.

⁵ Lawrence Kapp & Barbara Salazar Torreon, [Reserve Component Personnel Issues: Questions And Answers](#), Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, 2014.

⁶ The difference between the figures 491,000 and 475,000 can be explained by the ongoing personnel cuts in the US Army. The figure of 475,000 was the budgetary objective targeted for 2015.

⁷ US Constitution, Article I, Section 8, clauses 15 & 16 and Article II, Section II, clause 1.

⁸ The District of Columbia's National Guard is actually an exclusively federal entity.

⁹ Kapp, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁰ Andrew Feickert & Lawrence Kapp, [Army Active Component \(AC\)/Reserve Component \(RC\) Force Mix: Considerations and Options for Congress](#), Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, 5 December 2014, p. 10.

¹¹ Title 10 of the USC.

¹² Feickert, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹³ In the United States, laws applicable to the armed forces are grouped under Title 10 of the Code of Laws of the United States of America. Anything concerning the National Guard is found under Title 32.

¹⁴ Kapp, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹⁵ IDT: *Inactive Duty for Training* more commonly known as *week-end drill*.

¹⁶ AT: *Annual Training* commonly referred to as *Summer Camp*.

¹⁷ *Reserve Component Personnel Issues*: p 3.

¹⁸ Derek S. Reveron *et al.*, *US Foreign Policy and Defense Strategy: the Evolution of an Incidental Power*, Georgetown University Press, 2015, p. 15.

¹⁹ “A standing military force, with an overgrown Executive will not long be safe companions to liberty. The means of defence against foreign danger, have been always the instruments of tyranny at home”. James Madison, speech at the Constitutional Convention, 29 June 1787.

²⁰ Feickert, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² CNGR-Commission on the National Guard and Reserves, [Transforming the National Guard and Reserves into a 21st Century Operational Force](#), Final Report to Congress and the Secretary of Defense, 31 January 2008, p. 6.

²³ Kapp, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

²⁴ Feickert, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

²⁵ David M. Church, [“Looking Back on Operation Jump Start”](#), *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 33, 2009.

²⁶ California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas.

²⁷ Kapp, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

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²⁹ Sidney J. Freedberg, [“National Guard Commanders Rise In Revolt Against Active Army; MG Rossi Questions Guard Combat Role”](#), *Breaking Defense*, 11 March 2014.

³⁰ James D. Campbell, [“The National Guard as a Strategic Hedge”](#), *Parameters* 44, 1, 2014.

³¹ Raphael S. Cohen, *Demystifying the Citizen Soldier*, Rand Corporation project Air Force, 2015.

³² Mark Thompson, [“An Army Apart: The Widening Military-Civilian Gap”](#), *Time*, 10 November 2010.