



A Historical Perspective on “Hollow Forces”

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Summary

Senior Department of Defense (DOD) leaders have invoked the specter of a “hollow force” to describe what could happen to the U.S. Armed Forces if significant cuts to the defense budget are enacted. While some Members and staff might be familiar with the hollow force and its causes, newer Members and staff might not have a similar understanding of the conditions that led to the hollow force and what actions were taken to improve the condition of the U.S. Armed Forces.

After several years of rapid growth in defense budgets, measures to reduce federal budget deficits have led to projections of a substantial decline in military spending over the next decade. As a result of limits on discretionary spending in the Budget Control Act of 2011, DOD is considering how to absorb a reduction of \$450 billion to \$500 billion in planned programs through FY2021. Senior defense officials have said that such reductions can be managed, but they also warn that that trade-offs among defense programs will require a reassessment of priorities, and that deeper cuts would weaken critical capabilities. A common theme is that, unless reductions are managed prudently, budget cuts of the magnitude required, let alone larger cuts, would risk creating a hollow force. The term hollow force refers to military forces that appear mission-ready but, upon examination, suffer from shortages of personnel and equipment and from deficiencies in training.

Historically, there were two periods—post-Vietnam and again in the 1990s—when the term hollow force was used to describe the U.S. Armed Forces. In the case of post-Vietnam, a variety of socioeconomic factors as well as funding decisions played a large role in the overall decline in readiness, particularly the decision to develop new weapon systems rather than funding other requirements. The 1990s hollow force, however, did not suffer from the socioeconomic problems that characterized the post-Vietnam force. Instead, the military of the early and mid-1990s was being deployed on a frequent basis for a variety of contingency operations and was viewed by some as being “overcommitted” relative to its size and resources. This overcommitment was further exacerbated by recruiting and retention concerns and a lack of funds to finance new weapon systems due to DOD decisions to emphasize readiness-related funding.

A number of current defense officials have warned about the return to a hollow force if the DOD budget is cut significantly. Other senior officers instead suggest that in the aftermath of two wars, a reduction in the defense budget and the force is not unprecedented and the services will be able to make the necessary adjustments to ensure readiness. Therefore, the question arises if it is fair to suggest that the military could become a hollow force if DOD funding was drastically reduced and if force structure and weapon systems programs were cut. Some believe this is a mischaracterization, as it is considered unlikely the quality of the force will decline, that pay and benefits will be cut to the point that service in the military becomes unattractive, and public support for the military will erode—all factors that lead to General Meyer’s description of the post-Vietnam Army as a hollow force. It is also noted that DOD has a great deal of discretion on how its funds are spent and how units are organized, manned, equipped, and trained, which is also a factor that contributes to readiness of the force.

As Congress will play a major role in shaping the Armed Forces in terms of size, capabilities, and how it is equipped and trained, a nuanced understanding of how the military once became “hollow” could provide a useful context for current and anticipated legislative action.

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Introduction

After several years of rapid growth in defense budgets, measures to reduce federal budget deficits have led to projections of a substantial decline in military spending over the next decade. As a result of limits on discretionary spending in the Budget Control Act of 2011 (P.L. 112-25), the Department of Defense (DOD) is considering how to absorb a reduction of about \$490 billion in planned programs through FY2021. Senior defense officials have said that such reductions can be managed, but they also warn that that trade-offs among defense programs will require a strategically grounded re-assessment of priorities, and deeper cuts would weaken critical capabilities. A common theme is, unless reductions are managed prudently, budget cuts of the magnitude required, let alone larger cuts, would risk creating a hollow force As former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates put it:

I am determined that we not repeat the mistakes of the past, where the budget targets were met mostly by taking a percentage off the top of everything, the simplest and most politically expedient approach both inside the Pentagon and outside of it. That kind of “salami-slicing” approach preserves overhead and maintains force structure on paper, but results in a hollowing-out of the force from a lack of proper training, maintenance and equipment—and manpower. That’s what happened in the 1970s—a disastrous period for our military—and to a lesser extent during the late 1990s.¹

Definition: What Is a “Hollow Force”?

The term hollow force was used initially in the late 1970s and subsequently in the 1990s to characterize military forces that appear mission-ready but, upon examination, suffer from shortages of personnel, equipment, and maintenance or from deficiencies in training. Although the size and composition of the force appeared adequate on paper, shortcomings identified when these forces were subjected to further scrutiny raised questions if these forces would be able to accomplish their assigned wartime missions.

Significance for Congress

The Administration has invoked the specter of a hollow force to describe what could happen to the U.S. Armed Forces if significant cuts to the defense budget are enacted. While some Members and staff might be familiar with the hollow force and its causes, newer Members and staff might not have a similar understanding of the conditions that led to the hollow force in the past and what actions were taken to improve the situation. Given the Administration’s plan to reduce troop strength in response to budgetary limitations and a new strategic direction, Congress—in its oversight, authorization, and appropriations role—will likely encounter Administration officials who claim that the U.S. military faces the prospect of once again becoming a hollow force As Congress will play a major role in shaping the Armed Forces both in terms of size, capabilities, and how it is equipped and trained, a nuanced understanding of how the military once became “hollow” could provide a useful context for current and anticipated legislative action.

¹ Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Remarks on Defense Spending Delivered at the American Enterprise Institute, May 24, 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1570>.

Background

Origins of the Hollow Force

Recent warnings about the need to avoid creating a hollow force evoke two periods in history in which the term was commonly used to characterize the state of the U.S. military—post-Vietnam and the 1990s. Matters of concern, though, differed considerably in those periods. At the end of the 1970s, the gravest concerns had to do with the quality of personnel. It was widely perceived that U.S. military conventional warfighting capabilities that had declined as the Vietnam War came to a close did not appear to be recovering adequately, particularly as the military services struggled to adapt to the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) instituted in 1973. Concerns about the quality of the volunteer force in general were compounded by apparent shortfalls in filling military units with personnel properly trained and experienced to handle their duties.

In the early 1990s, in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War, U.S. military forces were regarded as highly capable, but the worry was that steep cuts in the budget might rapidly erode hard-won gains in personnel quality and also in the quality of training and operations. Unless pay and benefits, training, equipment, and personnel support efforts were sustained, in this view, short-term military readiness would suffer, forces would lose the edge they had achieved after years of intense effort, and capabilities would be increasingly difficult to restore in the future.

By the mid-to-late 1990s, warnings about the hollow force took a couple of different turns. Initially, a persistent complaint was that repeated commitments to contingency operations abroad put a strain on personnel and disrupted preparations for major conflicts. New concerns about recruiting and retention also began to emerge.² By the end of the 1990s, the main issue had changed to funding for major weapons programs. With defense spending limited by ongoing battles over budget deficits, DOD elected to protect readiness-related funds for operations, but at the expense of extending a “procurement holiday” in which relatively little money was available to finance new weapons platforms. Investments for future capabilities, in this view, were sacrificed to protect the appearance of high levels of readiness in the short term.

The following discussion provides a context for the current discussion of hollow forces by offering more detailed information on budget trends and other matters that relate to hollow forces when it was first discussed with regard to personnel matters in the 1970s, and as it has been redefined periodically since then.

Post-Vietnam

Most military experts agree that the U.S. military was in poor shape after the end of the Vietnam War.³ The end of the draft in 1973 initially compounded the problems of the U.S. Armed Forces. The early years of the all-volunteer force witnessed a significant drop in education levels and test scores among recruits, widespread recruitment scandals, and increases in bad discharges and

² For additional information on recruiting and retention see CRS Report RL31297, *Recruiting and Retention in the Active Component Military: Are There Problems?* by (name redacted).

³ William Darryl Henderson, *The Hollow Army*, Greenwood Press, NY, 1990, p. xi.

peacetime desertions.⁴ One study noted that “because the military of this era was not viewed as an attractive career option, none of the Services had much luck in accessing quality recruits.”⁵

Service in the U.S. Armed Forces during this period was not particularly attractive for a variety of reasons.⁶ Military base pay increased by 61% in nominal terms (not adjusted for inflation) between 1969 and 1973, in the run-up to the AVF.⁷ But salaries did not keep up with high levels of inflation during the remainder of the 1970s and fell progressively further and further behind the cost of living. By 1980, base pay had declined by almost 20% in real terms (adjusted for inflation) since the end of FY1972 (see **Figure 1**). “Catch up” pay raises of 11.7% in 1980 and 14.3% in 1981 narrowed the gap, but were not enough to close it, in part because high levels of inflation continued in those years.⁸

⁴ Ibid.

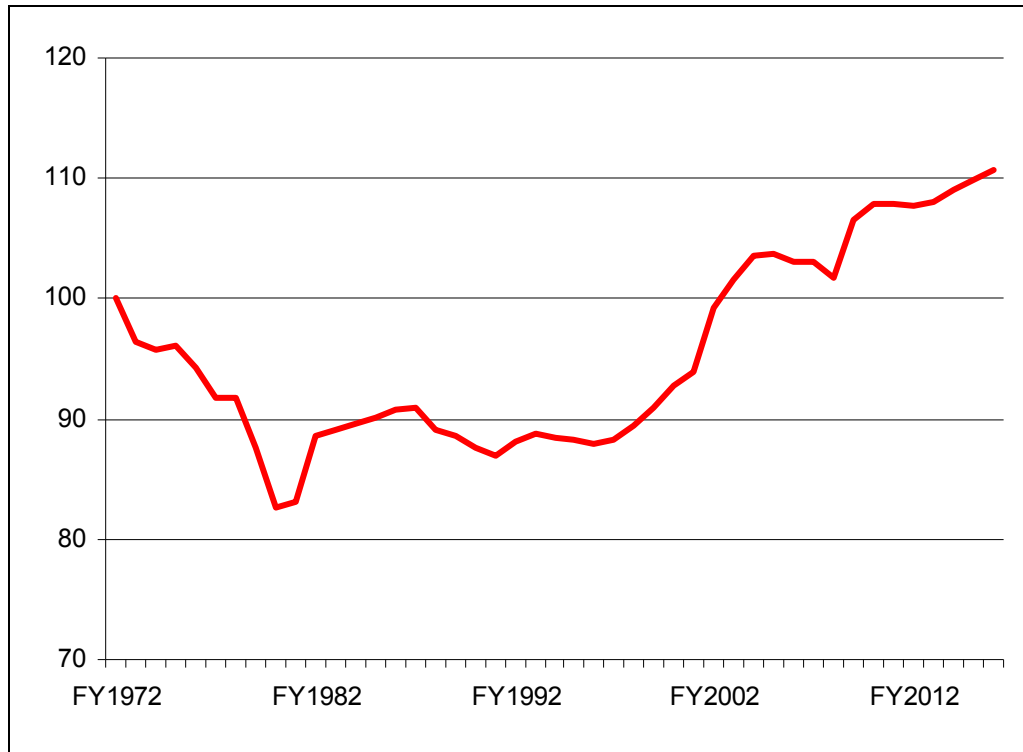
⁵ Robinson, Jondrow, Junor, and Oi, *Avoiding a Hollow Force: An Examination of Navy Readiness*, Center for Naval Analysis, Alexandria, VA, April 1996, p. 7.

⁶ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from Brigadier General Robert H. Scales, Jr., *Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War*, Brassley’s, Washington, DC, 1994, pp. 15-16.

⁷ From Henderson, cited above, and confirmed by CPI-U figures in Department of Defense, *National Defense Budget Estimates, Fiscal Year 2012*, February 2011, Table 5-1, at http://comptroller.defense.gov/defbudget/fy2012/FY12_Green_Book.pdf.

⁸ The Consumer Price Index for Urban Wage Earners and Clerical Workers (CPI-W) increased by 10.4% in 1979, 13.5% in 1980, and 11.1% in 1981—see Department of Defense, *National Defense Budget Estimates, Fiscal Year 2012*, February 2011, Table 5-1, at http://comptroller.defense.gov/defbudget/fy2012/FY12_Green_Book.pdf. For additional discussion of the pay gap, see CRS Report RL33446, *Military Pay and Benefits: Key Questions and Answers*, by (name redacted).

**Figure I. Cumulative Military Pay Raises, FY1972-FY2016,
Indexed to the Consumer Price Index**
(index, FY1972 = 100)



Source: CRS based on military pay raises and consumer price index (CPI-W) data in Department of Defense, *National Defense Budget Estimates, Fiscal Year 2012*, February 2011, at http://comptroller.defense.gov/defbudget/fy2012/FY12_Green_Book.pdf.

Notes: Shows the cumulative trend in pay, based on annual pay raises, relative to the consumer price index (CPI-W). If pay raises matched the CPI, the data line would equal 100 through the whole period. A decline reflects pay raises that did not keep up with inflation as measured by the CPI.

Post-inflation declines in take-home pay in the 1970s may also have aggravated some widely perceived problems in the structure of pay raises initially provided to implement the AVF. The initial AVF pay raises were disproportionately skewed toward inducing enlistment and keeping junior service members in the military. Non-commissioned officers, with many more years of service, were given smaller increases, and by 1973 made only about 30% more in pay than a newly enlisted member.⁹ In part, the structure of pay raises reflected the premise that incentives to remain in the force were very strong for personnel with more than 10 years or so of service time because of the prospect of full retirement benefits after reaching 20 years of service.

Beyond that, benefits for military families, such as housing and moving allowances, also lost value, both relative to inflation and in proportion to base pay, making it relatively more difficult for service members with families to make ends meet at a time when a larger share of the force was getting older and having families. By 1979, the salaries of very junior enlisted had dropped so low that the income of an E-4 with a small family was below the U.S. government's official

⁹ Brigadier General Robert H. Scales, Jr., *Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War*, Brassey's, Washington, DC, 1994, p. 15.

poverty level.¹⁰ Also in 1979, Army commissaries reportedly accepted almost \$10 million in food stamps from service members, which drew a great deal of media and political attention.

As pay and benefits eroded over the course of the 1970s, a growing shortage of qualified recruits was directly reflected in assessments of unit readiness. By 1979, the Army fell 15,000 short of its recruitment goal and the Navy was short 20,000 petty officers.¹¹ Soldier quality was also of concern. In 1980, only 50% of those recruited had graduated from high school. Statistics for drug use, crime, and unauthorized absences—while not as high as during the Vietnam War—were considered unacceptable by defense officials. The Army signed up so many poor-quality soldiers during the late 1970s that 40% of new recruits were separated from the Army for disciplinary reasons or unsuitability prior to the completion of their first enlistment.

Throughout the force, serious shortages in qualified soldiers became a pervasive problem affecting unit readiness ratings. By 1979, 6 of 10 Army divisions stationed in the United States were assessed as “not combat-ready.” In Europe, one of the four U.S. divisions facing the Warsaw Pact, presumably the highest priority units in the Army, was also rated “not combat-ready.” The Commander of the U.S. Army in Europe, General Fredrick Kroesen, publically complained that the U.S. Army in Europe had become “obsolescent.”¹²

Some describe the readiness posture in the Reserve components—which constituted the nation’s strategic reserve—as even more dire than the Active component. Reserve forces suffered from the same personnel shortages as did their active duty counterparts, but equipment and training deficiencies were even more pronounced. In terms of equipment, shortages were widespread and the Reserves often had to make do with “hand me down” equipment from the Active component—equipment that was not always in the best of condition. Training time for Reserve forces was also considered inadequate in relation to their assigned wartime missions.

While personnel issues were at the heart of concerns about the hollow force, shortages of critical equipment, equipment repair, and availability of repair parts were also recurring apprehensions. Some officials also complained about declines in operational training. It is generally difficult to show a strict correlation between funding for operation and maintenance, however, and commonly used measures of military readiness.¹³ By the late 1970s, some important readiness measures¹⁴ showed a considerable decline. The total funding available for operation and maintenance relative to the size of the force, however, did not decline after the Vietnam War, but continued to grow at a very consistent rate above inflation. DOD tracking of Operation and Maintenance funding has varied so much over the years, however, that it is not possible without thoroughly reviewing and reorganizing DOD budget data at a very detailed level to follow trends in consistent categories over time.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Lieutenant Colonel Polly A. Peyer, U.S. Air Force, *Hollow Force: Scare or Dare*, Executive Research Project, Industrial College of the Armed Forces, Washington, DC, 1994, p. 9.

¹² Brigadier General Robert H. Scales, Jr., *Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War*, Brassey’s, Washington, DC, 1994, p. 16.

¹³ For a recent discussion, see Congressional Budget Office, *Linking the Readiness of the Armed Forces to DoD’s Operation and Maintenance Spending*, April 2011, <http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/121xx/doc12148/04-25-Readiness.pdf>.

¹⁴ Readiness measures include personnel strength, operational readiness rates of equipment, numbers and types of equipment on hand, and performance on training exercises and evaluations.

¹⁵ The Institute for Defense Analyses has developed a “normalized” Operation and Maintenance database under a (continued...)

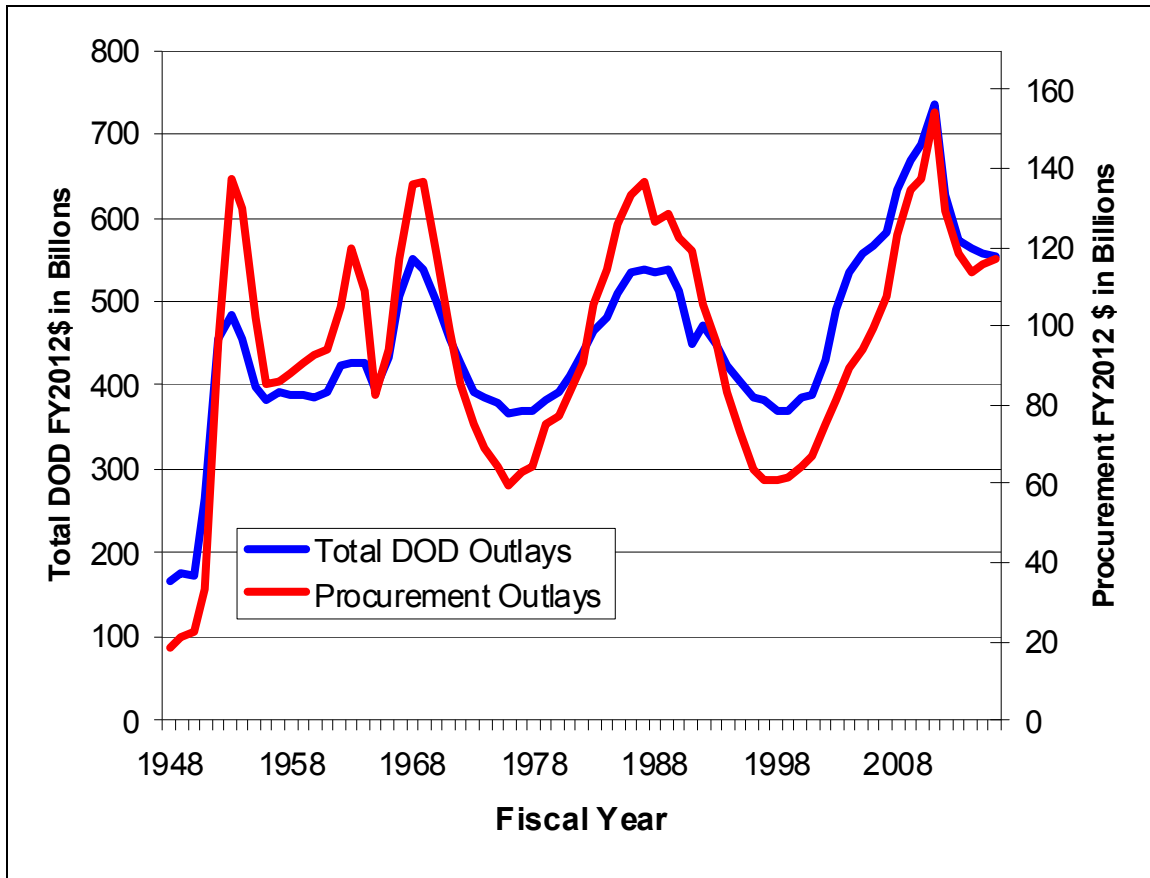
A lack of funding for weapons procurement was a final factor that added to perceptions of a hollow force in the 1970s, though it was not the main issue in initial assessments of the problem. The generation of weapons employed during the Vietnam War largely reflected technology developed in the 1950s that was widely seen as obsolete by the end of the war. A new generation of weapons was under development, ranging from the M-1 tank and the Apache attack helicopter to the F-15 fighter and Aegis radar-equipped cruisers and destroyers. By the end of the 1970s, many of these new systems had completed development and were ready to be procured, but budgets fell far short of the levels needed to achieve production rates that would replace aging equipment, even for a substantially smaller force.

For the military services, the lack of funding for more modern weapons became a steadily more important concern. In 1978, the service chiefs jointly urged a substantial increase in the defense budget, in large part to finance planned weapons programs. Subsequently, the growth in defense spending that began in the late 1970s and that accelerated in the early 1980s was devoted largely to weapons acquisition. As **Figure 2** shows, procurement funding from the 1950s through the 1990s varied disproportionately compared to overall budget trends. When budgets increased, procurement funding climbed more steeply. When budgets declined, procurement funding fell more precipitously. A concern for the future expressed by some is that procurement and research, development, test, and evaluation (RDT&E) accounts may once again be reduced disproportionately as funding declines.

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contract with the DOD Office of Cost Analysis and Program Evaluation (CAPE), formerly the Office of Program Analysis and Evaluation. The database tracks O&M funding trends in consisted categories over time. The database is not available to other agencies, however, but is regularly used inside the Defense Department to assess funding.

Figure 2. Trend in Procurement Outlays Compared to Trend in Total National Defense Outlays, FY1948-FY2016
(amounts in billions of constant FY2012 \$)



Source: CRS based on data in Department of Defense, *National Defense Budget Estimates, Fiscal Year 2012*, February 2011, at http://comptroller.defense.gov/defbudget/fy2012/FY12_Green_Book.pdf.

Notes: National defense total on left-hand scale, procurement on right-hand scale. Includes war-related funding.

Other Factors Contributing to the Hollow Force of the 1970s¹⁶

The difficulties that the services encountered in managing the transition to the All-Volunteer Force were the initial focus of the hollow force argument, but they were certainly not the sole concern. A 1996 study by the Center for Naval Analysis (CNA) suggests seven possible causes of the post-Vietnam hollow force:

- low public support for the military;
- pressure to cut defense spending;
- difficulties in maintaining an all-volunteer force (i.e., failure to attract and retain high-quality recruits);

¹⁶ Robinson, Jondrow, Junor, and Oi, *Avoiding a Hollow Force: An Examination of Navy Readiness*, Center for Naval Analysis, Alexandria, VA, April 1996, p. 7.

- declining pay;
- poor morale;
- delays in fielding modern armaments and equipment; and
- inadequate attention to maintenance of existing equipment.

Budget Priorities as a Contributing Factor

The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) suggested that other factors—notably overall priorities within the defense budget—also contributed to the hollow force:

Between 1969 and 1975, public disillusionment with the nation's role in Vietnam encouraged rapid reductions in defense spending. Expenditures on national defense, adjusted for inflation, fell by 31 percent. Limited budgets, together with rising oil prices and increased personnel costs resulting from the elimination of the draft, meant that the acquisition of modern weapons by the military, which had been delayed by the Vietnam War, was delayed still further. Thus, when the defense budget did start to rise slowly between 1976 and 1981, DOD emphasized the procurement of new weapon systems. In the eyes of some critics, the decision to emphasize modernization over readiness was an error in judgment that left existing units unable to operate. Yet the underlying problem may have been an imbalance between defense resources and national security commitments that made it impossible for DOD to buy both readiness and modernization.¹⁷

CBO's assessment suggests, aside from the aforementioned social conditions, that leadership decisions on procurement of new weapons versus readiness also played a role in the creation of the hollow force. Budget figures bear this out, at least to a degree. Between FY1976 and FY1981, O&M funding increased by 30% after adjusting for inflation, while procurement plus R&D funding grew by 43%.

General Meyer and the "Hollow Army"

General Edward C. Meyer, Chief of Staff of the Army (1979-1983), is credited with introducing the term "hollow Army" during a May 29, 1980, House Armed Services Committee hearing. General Meyer noted during this hearing that

Right now, as I have said before, we have a hollow Army. Our forward-deployed forces are at full strength in Europe, in Panama, and in Korea. Our tactical forces in the United States are some 17,000 under strength. Therefore, anywhere you go in the United States, except for the 82d Airborne Division, which is also filled up, you will find companies and platoons which have been zeroed out.¹⁸

While many units were indeed "zeroed out,"¹⁹ it should be noted that defense officials also had the option to reduce the number of Army divisions and keep them at 100% strength. In this

¹⁷ Congressional Budget Office, *Trends in Selected Indicators of Military Readiness, 1980 Through 1993*, March 1994, pp. 3-4.

¹⁸ National Defense Funding Levels for Fiscal Year 1981, Hearing Before the Investigations Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, 96th Congress, May 29, 1980, p. 18.

¹⁹ "Zeroed Out" refers to decisions taken to not fully man units at their authorized strength but keeping the unit "on the books" in hopes that in the future when manpower became available, these units could be returned to their full (continued...)

regard, some suggest that DOD and the Army itself also bear a degree of culpability in creating General Meyer's hollow divisions.

One explanation as to why the Army chose to maintain its divisions and associated headquarters and supporting units but reduce their strength was that the Army had a strategic requirement to provide adequate numbers of units to address potential contingencies. The Army maintained two Corps and a number of divisions in Europe to counter the Warsaw Pact, forces in Korea to counter potential North Korean aggression, and forces in Panama to ensure the sovereignty of the Panama Canal. It also was required to address potential Arab-Israeli and Iranian security challenges. War plans of this era also reinforced the need for specific numbers and types of formations, as they tended to focus more on unit-to-unit ratios to achieve victory as opposed to apportioning capabilities of the services against potential threat scenarios.

According to CBO, "soon after his [General Meyer's] testimony, the term hollow force was being widely used to characterize not only the shortages of experienced personnel but also the shortages of training, weapons, and equipment that undermined military readiness during the mid and late 1970s."²⁰ Subsequently, a number of anecdotal press accounts from 1980 served to focus greater attention on the issue of hollow forces. In one case, the commander of the USS *Canisteo*, a fleet oiler, was unable to deploy because of a lack of experienced personnel in the engine room, and a U.S. Air Force fighter wing failed a mobilization test because only 23 of the 66 assigned F-15 fighters were mission capable.²¹

Fixing the Hollow Force in the 1980s

Four basic factors have been credited with the reversal of the Army's decline in the 1980s: congressional support for higher military spending, training reorganization, doctrinal emphasis, and improved personnel policies.²² In 1980 and 1981, Congress began what was described as a "rapid infusion of monies" into the services. As noted earlier, servicemember salaries were increased by 25% between 1981 and 1982, which, even if eroded by inflation, gave personnel a strong reason to think that things were changing. Other, more targeted improvements in compensation—such as the Montgomery G.I. Bill (P.L. 98-525)—reinforced the message, as did overall changes in the quality of military combat planning, training, and weapons investments.

Research had shown, for example, that money for college was the primary reason for enlisting among the most high-scoring soldiers on Armed Forces intelligence tests.²³ In the 1980s, Congress reinstated the GI Bill and initiated college funds, which helped close the personnel

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authorized strength. This permitted the Army to keep 16 Active Duty divisions to allocate against strategic requirements.

²⁰ Congressional Budget Office, *Trends in Selected Indicators of Military Readiness, 1980 Through 1993*, March 1994, p. 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²² Information in this section is taken from Brigadier General Robert H. Scales, Jr., *Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War*, Brassley's, Washington, DC, 1994, pp. 17-18 and Lieutenant Colonel Polly A. Peyer, U.S. Air Force, *Hollow Force: Scare or Dare*, Executive Research Project, Industrial College of the Armed Forces, Washington, DC, 1994, pp. 11-12.

²³ Brigadier General Robert H. Scales, Jr., *Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War*, Brassley's, Washington, DC, 1994, p. 17.

quality gap. Army Major General Maxwell Thurman was given the task of reforming Army recruiting practices and how the Army trained. During this period, the Army developed and institutionalized Air Land Battle Doctrine, which helped to focus training and the procurement of new weapons systems and, as a by-product, led to a more efficient use of resources. Finally, the Army focused on enhancing unit cohesion, and the practice of stripping personnel from some units to fill out deploying units was diminished. The other services embarked on similar efforts to improve personnel quality, training, and readiness during the decade of the 1980s.

Fully assessing the results of all of these initiatives is far beyond the scope of this short report—effects would not likely be felt for several years, readiness measures are often problematic, and the value of large investments in new weapons programs and other equipment is often difficult to assess in any case. To the extent concerns about the hollow force at the end of the 1970s had to do with the quality of enlistments, however, revisions in military pay and benefits appear to have entailed dramatic improvements over a very short period of time. **Table 1**, drawn from a May 1984 DOD report that compiled measures of improvements in U.S. warfighting capabilities between 1980 and 1984, shows substantial progress in recruit quality as measured by performance on the Armed Forces Qualification Test, which measures cognitive ability. The percentage of enlisted recruits in the top two AFQT categories improved from below the national average to considerably above it. Perhaps most importantly, the proportion of recruits in the lowest permissible qualification category, Category IV, declined from 31% in FY1980 to 8% by FY1983.

Table 1. Active Duty Military Recruits, by Armed Forces Qualification Test Results, FY1980-FY1984
(percentage in each category)

AFQT Category	Baseline % 1980 Youth Population	Active Duty Enlisted Recruits				
		FY1980	FY1981	FY1982	FY1983	FY1984 (est.)
I	4	3	3	3	4	4
II	33	24	31	34	37	38
III	32	42	49	50	50	50
IV	24	31	18	13	8	8
V	7	0	0	0	0	0

Source: U.S. Department of Defense, *Improvements in U.S. Warfighting Capability FY1980-84*, May 1984.

The Hollow Force Debates of the 1990s

The rehabilitated U.S. military demonstrated that it was no longer a hollow force by virtue of its performance in the 1991 Gulf War. But even as U.S. forces were beginning to deploy to the Persian Gulf in the fall of 1990, Congress approved a new budget agreement that reflected plans for a substantial decline in defense spending over the next three to five years, continuing cuts that began in the FY1986 budget. Meanwhile, General Colin Powell, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, was beginning to lay out the premises of the “Base Force,” a revised defense plan that entailed substantial cuts in the size of the force based largely on the premise that the Soviet threat had diminished and that strategic warning of a renewal of the threat would extend for some years.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the desire for a “peace dividend” subsequently led to still further budget reductions. In 1993, the incoming Clinton Administration announced plans to trim \$60 billion over the five years through FY1997 from the outgoing Administration’s defense plan, with most of the savings due to a reduction in active duty end-strength from about 1.6 million planned for the Base Force to about 1.4 million. DOD’s 1993 “Bottom-Up Review” provided a new basis for force planning with a requirement that forces be prepared to prevail in two overlapping “Major Regional Contingencies,” each on the model of Operation Desert Storm.

Critics of the Bottom-Up Review argued both that planned force levels were not adequate to carry out the strategy and that projected budgets were not sufficient to sustain planned force levels. A central theme in the budget debate—articulated very forcefully by Senator McCain, among others—was that earlier budget cuts had already led to a decline in military readiness and that additional reductions would resurrect the hollow force of the 1970s. In May 1993, Senator McCain asked the service chiefs to respond to a series of questions about the readiness status of their services, and he summarized his analysis of their responses in a series of speeches on the Senate floor beginning on June 30. The speeches, along with the service chief’s responses to Senator McCain, were later collected in a report entitled *Going Hollow: The Warnings of Our Chiefs of Staff*.²⁴

In his assessment of the chiefs’ views, Senator McCain did not argue that readiness had yet declined to levels of the late 1970s, and he found no one factor that was clearly undermining readiness across all of the services. Rather, he cited concerns about trends in several areas, including, among other matters,

- preserving a high operational tempo at the expense of equipment overhauls and depot maintenance, keeping personnel deployed for excessive periods, and strains on major combat equipment;
- increasing depot maintenance backlogs;
- underfunding of personnel pay and benefits, inadequate end-strength, and excessive turbulence in personnel deployments;
- underfunding of weapons modernization, including upgrades of current systems and purchases of munitions; and
- funding peacekeeping and humanitarian operations at the expense of readiness.

Senator McCain also emphasized the importance of measuring readiness in terms of real-world requirements. By some standards, he pointed out, even the performance of U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf War raised concerns, particularly about the ability to respond rapidly enough to an unanticipated challenge—

Time and again, we have learned that our readiness measures are unrealistic or fail to anticipate real-world demands of . . . The Gulf War, for example, demonstrated all of these problems. In spite of the highest readiness funding in our history, we were not ready to fight when we deployed. We took months to adjust the organization, training, and support structures of our active combat forces, we experienced major problems with some aspects of the call up and training of our reserves, and we literally had to make thousands of modifications to our combat equipment, munitions, support equipment, and battle

²⁴ Senator John McCain, “Going Hollow: The Warnings of Our Chiefs of Staff,” July 1993.

management and communications systems. Without the months Saddam Hussein gave us, these readiness problems might well have cost us thousands of lives. Few future opponents are likely to give us the most precious gift of modern war: time.²⁵

Other senior Members of Congress echoed some of Senator McCain's concerns. As early as March 1993, Representative John Murtha, chairman of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, warned that the cost of overseas operations would weaken the force. "If President Clinton does not back off the nation's costly overseas deployments," he said, "and find some hardware program to cut, the U.S. military will become a 'hollow force' beginning in FY 95."²⁶ Members of the House Armed Services Committee also became concerned that the Army was using funds needed to sustain readiness instead to finance deployments, and the committee established two panels to further investigate the hollow force issue.²⁷

In response to concerns about readiness, in June 1993, then-Secretary of Defense Les Aspin established a readiness task force, chaired by General Meyer, to review the readiness status of forces and to recommend measures to help sustain readiness. The task force, operating under the auspices of the Defense Science Board, issued an interim report in February 1994²⁸ and a final report in June.²⁹ The task force found that the current readiness of the force was "acceptable in most measurable areas," but it also proposed measures to avoid what it characterized as "legitimate concerns" that "continuing force reductions, strategy changes, and budget reductions could cause serious readiness degradations."³⁰ Among the measures the task force recommended were

- "Measurement systems to improve tracking of the effect of funding allocations on readiness." The task force noted, for example, that unit commanders had the flexibility to allocate operation and maintenance funds between expenditures that might be less important for short-term readiness, such as facility maintenance, and expenditures more directly related to readiness, such as training days. The panel urged more detailed and timely tracking of directly readiness-related funding.
- Development of a system for funding contingency operations that "does not divert, delay or disrupt the flow of funds needed to maintain readiness of forces not engaged in such operations."
- "Increased emphasis on Joint and Combined readiness and requirements, including development of joint mission essential task lists."

²⁵ "Going Hollow," Tab A (the report is not paginated; the quoted passage is on the next to last page of the initial section of the report).

²⁶ "Murtha Sees Hollow Military Approaching," *Defense Daily*, Vol. 178, No. 51, March 18, 1993.

²⁷ See Lieutenant Colonel Polly A. Peyer, U.S. Air Force, *Hollow Force: Scare or Dare*, Executive Research Project, Industrial College of the Armed Forces, Washington, DC, 1994, pp. 13-14.

²⁸ General Edward C. "Shy" Meyer, Chairman, Defense Science Board Task Force on Readiness, "Defense Science Board Task Force on Readiness: Interim Report," February, 1994.

²⁹ General Edward C. "Shy" Meyer, Chairman, Defense Science Board Task Force on Readiness, "Defense Science Board Task Force on Readiness: Final Report," June, 1994, at <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA286412&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf>.

³⁰ See Final Report, p. i and p. 2.

Through the rest of the Clinton Administration, budget trends—and particularly annual adjustments in budgets—reflected a considerable degree of sensitivity about readiness. Early in the Administration, budget projections showed operation and maintenance accounts leveling off, after adjusting for inflation, in the later years of Future Years Defense Plans (FYDPs).³¹ Because operating costs have perennially grown at a fairly rapid pace above inflation, however, under a flat budget, funding would fall increasingly short of levels required to sustain readiness. A case can also be made that projections of O&M funding inherited from the previous Administration may have fallen short of levels needed to meet readiness goals, which compounded potential insufficiencies.³²

DOD's response was to add funds to O&M accounts as each annual budget was adjusted before being sent to Congress. The plus ups in O&M accounts, in turn, came mainly at the expense of weapons procurement, and the subsequent cuts in planned procurement amounts soon became a major issue. For several years, DOD set a target of \$60 billion a year for procurement, which was pushed further and further into the future—procurement funding was frozen at just under \$45 billion in each year from FY1994 to FY1998. In effect, growing O&M costs led DOD to extend what was characterized as a "procurement holiday" year by year through most of the decade.

Through the 1990s, along with the "procurement holiday," the effect of repeated deployments of forces in military operations abroad became a focus of concerns about readiness. The U.S. military intervention in Haiti in 1994, military operations in Bosnia and Kosovo from 1995 through 1998, and the maintenance of no-fly zones in Iraq from 1993 on, along with a number of humanitarian operations, were seen as a strain on the force, particularly because even relatively small, long-duration operations required a relatively large rotation base to sustain deployments. In addition, because—as a matter of long-standing policy—many Army units were not fully manned in peacetime, contingency operations created a disproportionate amount of turbulence in the force, as personnel were reassigned to fill out deploying units.³³

By the late 1990s, the Army was reportedly being mobilized for contingency operations 15 times as frequently as in the past decade.³⁴ When President George W. Bush took office, Army leadership suggested that its smaller force could not sustain these deployments indefinitely.³⁵ Many service leaders were especially worried about the effect of repeated deployments on retention.

In the end, however, concerns about readiness that were widely expressed at the beginning of the 1990s did not materialize. Although recruitment and retention of quality personnel did not meet

³¹ The Defense Department prepares detailed projections of the budget for five or six years ahead. A six-year plan is prepared every other year and then adjusted in the following year for the remaining five years of the planning period.

³² For a comparison of George H.W. Bush Administration and Clinton Administration defense plans, see CRS Report 95-20F, *A Comparison of Clinton Administration and Bush Administration Long-Term Defense Budget Plans for FY1994-99*, by (name redacted), December 20, 1994, 6 pp. (The report is not currently available on the CRS website, but congressional offices may request a copy from the author or through the CRS request system.)

³³ United States General Accounting Office (GAO), "Military Readiness: Data and Trends for April 1995 to March 1996," GAO/NSIAD-96-194, August 1996.

³⁴ Information in this section, unless otherwise noted, is taken from James Fallows, "The Hollow Army," *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 2004.

³⁵ Robinson, Jondrow, Junor, and Oi, *Avoiding a Hollow Force: An Examination of Navy Readiness*, Center for Naval Analysis, Alexandria, VA, April 1996, p. 2.

service targets,³⁶ the services were able to overcome these shortfalls, and O&M funding levels remained consistent with long-term trends, though at the expense of weapons procurement. And once budget deficits declined, increases in military pay and benefits became a high priority. A significant Clinton Administration initiative was to increase housing allowances substantially, which boosted take-home pay dollar-for-dollar since this benefit was not taxed. Ongoing operations abroad continued to put some strains on the force, though less so over time as deployments to the Balkans were regularized and assigned increasingly to reserve units.

The use of the term hollow force to describe the effects of the defense budget decline of the 1990s does not appear apt, and certainly not if it is taken to reflect a parallel with the personnel and other readiness-related shortfalls of the 1970s. Instead, the decline in budgets in the 1990s was reflected mainly in amounts available for weapons modernization. Procurement declined to a low point of about half the peak in the mid-1980s and began to turn up substantially only when budgets began to climb in FY1998 and accelerated after FY2000.

Current References to Hollow Forces

Return to a Hollow Force?

As the U.S. government debates significant defense budget cuts as a means of reducing the nation's deficit and a new post Iraq and Afghanistan strategic shift to the Asia-Pacific region, some officials are invoking the specter of a new hollow force. On the occasion of taking the oath of office for Secretary of Defense on July 1, 2011, Leon Panetta noted:

Even as the United States addresses fiscal challenges at home, there will be **no hollow force** on my watch. That will require us all to be disciplined in how we manage taxpayer resources.³⁷

During an October 27, 2011, hearing before the House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Readiness, a number of references to an impending hollow force were made by senior DOD leadership:³⁸

- **General Peter W. Chiarelli, Vice Chief of Staff of the Army:** In a press report on the hearing, General Chiarelli was quoted as saying "Asked the representatives to remember that the services have fought a 10-year war, with an all-volunteer force ... that force is amazingly resilient, but at the same time, it is strained," he said. "Its equipment is strained, soldiers are strained, families are strained. But they've been absolutely amazing over these 10 years at war." Chiarelli said he understands budget cuts and corresponding force reductions have to be made. "However, we must make them responsibly so that we do not end up with either a **hollowed out force** ... or an unbalanced force."

³⁶ For information on recruiting and retention shortfalls see CRS Report RL31297, *Recruiting and Retention in the Active Component Military: Are There Problems?* by (name redacted).

³⁷ Jim Garamone, "Panetta Pledges 'No Hollow Force' on His Watch," American Forces Press Service, July 1, 2011.

³⁸ Jim Garamone, "Vice Chiefs Detail Consequences of Budget Cuts," American Forces Press Service, October 27, 2011.

- **General Joseph Dunford, Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps:** In a press report on the hearing, General Dunford was quoted as saying, “As Defense Secretary [Leon] Panetta refines the strategy, the commandant is going to use what we learned during the force-structure review effort to make recommendations.... With regard to balance, we don’t want to make cuts in a manner that would create a **hollow force**.”

It has been suggested that the use of a hollow force has instead “become a convenient turn of phrase that tends to cut off all rational debate about national defense priorities.”³⁹ Some senior military officers reportedly dispute the notion of a return to a hollow force:

- **Marine Corps Lieutenant General Richard Mills, recently returned from commanding forces in Afghanistan.** “‘I know we are going to look at some reduction in numbers. I’ve gone through this a couple of times in my career. Each time the military has had to tighten its belt, we continued to function very well.’ Mills said he is not overly concerned that the Marine Corps will not have adequate resources to do its job. ‘I say that from experience,’ said Mills. ‘I can remember times when it was tough to get fuel for vehicles to go to the field to train, so you walked; when it was tough to get ammunition to shoot for training, but you made do.’”⁴⁰
- **Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey** reportedly “told a 2011 gathering of defense contractors that he expects some budget pains, but he is still certain that the Army will have proper resources to be dominant in the future, I’ve been trying to convince people to stop wringing their hands at this point about money. Inside the Beltway, contractors and lawmakers are fretting about the fate of the Abrams tank or the Bradley vehicle production lines. But rather than obsess over line items in the budget, Army leaders should start thinking about how to reshape the Army for post-Iraq and Afghanistan world.”⁴¹

Potential Issues for Congress

Is It a Fair Comparison?

To ask whether projected budget trends are likely to lead to anything comparable to the hollow force of the 1970s—or, alternatively, the “procurement holiday” of the 1990s—is to raise those eras as a cautionary note about budget cuts. But is it an appropriate comparison?

As previously noted, as many as seven possible causes have been cited for the hollow force of the late 1970s. If these seven causes are examined for contemporary relevance, five of the seven causes would be non-applicable. Most analysts would likely agree *public support for the military* is at a high point. For example, a May 2010 national telephone survey conducted by Rasmussen Reports, LLC found that 74% of Americans surveyed had a favorable opinion of the U.S.

³⁹ Sandra I. Erwin, “Cries of ‘Hollow Military’ Stifle Rational Debate on Future Spending,” *National Defense*, June 2011.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

military.⁴² In terms of *recruiting and retention*, CRS Report RL32965, *Recruiting and Retention: An Overview of FY2009 and FY2010 Results for Active and Reserve Component Enlisted Personnel*, notes in an overview of FY2010 results:

All the Active Components achieved their recruit quantity goals while recruit quality generally increased over the previous year, in some cases markedly. Virtually all new recruits had high school diplomas, and nearly three-quarters scored above average on the Armed Forces Qualification Test. Retention remained strong for all the services, with the Army and Navy exceeding their goals by substantial margins. The Air Force missed its goal for first term ("Zone A") personnel by 7%, and was slightly short of its goal for career ("Zone C") personnel. All of the Reserve Components except the Army National Guard met or exceeded their recruit quantity goals. The National Guard shortfall was due to an intentional effort to cut back recruiting in order to lower its strength, which had gone beyond its authorized end-strength. Recruit quality continued to improve for nearly all the Reserve Components. All of the Reserve Components finished the year under their attrition ceilings, and almost all showed lower attrition (better retention) than in FY2009.⁴³

It can be argued that a smaller military and a smaller budget could instead result in the military being even more selective in terms of recruiting and retaining service members, thereby improving the overall quality of the force.

The issue of *declining pay* also does not appear to be a relevant factor in the potential return to a hollow force. CRS Report RL33446, *Military Pay and Benefits: Key Questions and Answers*, notes that

In the nearly 10 years since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, basic pay has increased nominally by nearly 35% (figure not adjusted for inflation). This figure does not include other increases in allowances, bonuses, or incentives. The cumulative effect is that most analysts now agree that the average annual cost per servicemember exceeds \$100,000.⁴⁴

When increased housing allowances, subsistence allowances, and enlistment and reenlistment bonuses are added, total cash take-home pay has increased even more. And when increases in retirement benefits, due to Tricare for Life medical benefits and concurrent receipt of military retired pay and veterans disability benefits, are considered, military compensation has grown by more than 55% above inflation since FY1998. There have recently been calls to reduce military compensation as a part of deficit reduction measures. Congress might want to consider carefully how such changes would affect the quality of the force on the assumption that the economy recovers, and private employment prospects for potential military-age recruits improve, making the military a less attractive employment option.

Reports suggest that the *morale* of U.S. troops is declining to some degree, based on surveys conducted in the summer of 2010.⁴⁵ This trend is largely attributed to repeated deployments to combat zones, which have significantly exacerbated stress and anxiety.⁴⁶ It might be expected that

⁴² Rasmussen Reports, "74% Have Favorable Opinion of the U.S. Military," May 29, 2010.

⁴³ CRS Report RL32965, *Recruiting and Retention: An Overview of FY2009 and FY2010 Results for Active and Reserve Component Enlisted Personnel*, by (name redacted).

⁴⁴ CRS Report RL33446, *Military Pay and Benefits: Key Questions and Answers*, by (name redacted).

⁴⁵ Anna Mulrine, "Study of U.S. Troops in Wartime: Morale Dроops and Acute Stress Rises," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 19, 2011.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

as large-scale deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan are phased out, the underlying factors that contribute to lowered morale could improve, making reported poor morale less of a consideration.

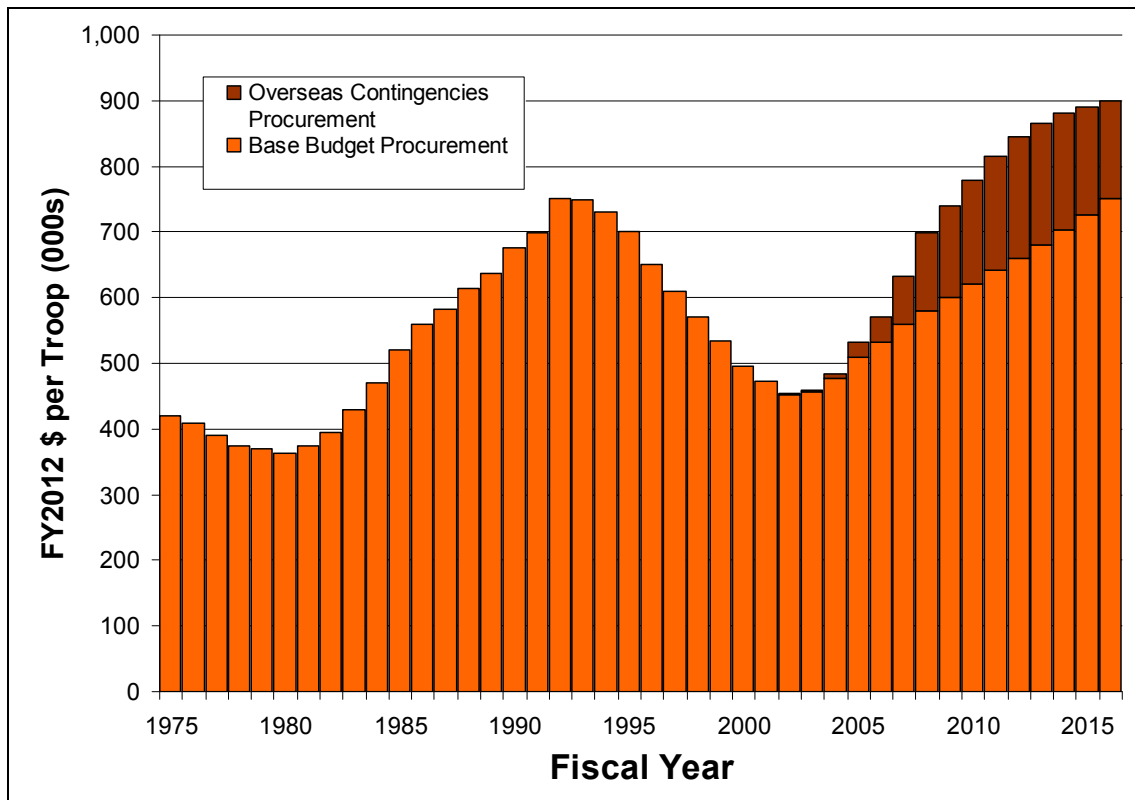
Congress has placed a great deal of emphasis on a funding reset for the services, which is intended to repair equipment that has been used in Iraq and Afghanistan and extend its overall useful life. While the services have suggested that future budget cuts might endanger reset, it should be noted that the services have a great deal of discretion on how operation and maintenance (O&M) funds are allocated and therefore have great influence on how the *reset of equipment* is conducted. Moreover, the August 2011 deficit agreement, reflected in the Budget Control Act of 2011, P.L. 112-25, does not establish limits on funding for Overseas Contingency Operations, which has been the primary source of reset expenditures.

Some have also warned that large-scale budget cuts would mean that the United States would have to abandon *modernization* and thereby put the United States at a military disadvantage. One recent report by the Stimson Center suggests, however, that over the past decade, the military services took advantage of increased procurement funding to modernize their forces more substantially than DOD officials have sometimes implied.⁴⁷ The Army was credited with upgrading both M-1 Abrams and M-2 Bradley fleets to the most state-of-the-art versions, as well as upgrading the majority of its support vehicles and its small arms inventory. The Air Force fielded next-generation systems such as the F-22 fighter and C-17 transport, and also acquired new capabilities, including a variety of multi-role, unmanned aircraft. The Navy used its procurement funds to advance its shipbuilding plans, which were recognized as underfunded, as well as to modernize its aircraft fleet. Even if modernization funds become more limited in future defense budgets, overall budget data suggest the services would enter this period after having invested in modernized forces about as substantially as in the weapons-driven buildup of the 1980s. CRS has calculated that when recent amounts for weapons modernization are compared to amounts in the mid-1980s, the total inflation-adjusted dollar value of relatively modern equipment available to forces today (i.e., equipment purchased within the past 10 years) appears relatively robust. **Figure 3** shows the prior 10 years of investments per active duty troop from FY1975 to FY2016.

⁴⁷ Information in this section is taken from (name redacted), "What We Bought: Defense Procurement from FY01 to FY10," The Henry L. Stimson Center, Washington, DC, October 2011.

Figure 3. Trend in the Value of the Prior 10 Years of Procurement Per Active Duty Troop, FY1975-FY2016

(thousands of constant FY2012 \$)



Source: CRS based on DOD data.

Notes: The amount in each year shows the total of the prior 10 years of procurement funding divided by active duty end-strength in each budget year. The figure is intended to measure the trend in the amount of relatively modern equipment available to military forces.

Given these conditions, it can be argued that the use of the term hollow force is inappropriate under present circumstances. Most of the conditions that existed in the 1970s do not exist today. It also is unlikely that even in the case of drastically reduced military funding and a smaller military, recruit quality would decline, pay and benefits would be drastically cut, or U.S. public support for the military would significantly decline.

In this context, perhaps a more appropriate analogy would be to the mid-1990s, when defense officials were concerned about “over-extending a smaller but capable military.” But over-extension might also prove to be relatively limited. Many defense and foreign policy experts believe that in the wake of Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States will be less inclined to deploy military forces in great numbers to deal with threats, relying instead on other instruments of U.S. national power to address these situations. Some believe that recent limited U.S. involvement in NATO’s operations against Libya and the decision to send 100 U.S. military personnel to Uganda to support regional efforts against the Lord’s Resistance Army might be the future model for more measured U.S. military responses to security challenges. Others note that the United States has yet to correctly predict future security challenges and it would be imprudent to rule out the possibility of having to deploy large numbers of U.S. forces in the future for an extended duration to respond to a crisis or conflict.

An informed discussion may be best served by military leaders avoiding reference to a hollow force and adopting a more measured approach to inform Congress and other decision makers about their concerns for the future state of the U.S. military. The current and, quite likely, the expected future cultural and economic conditions facing the U.S. military appear to bear little resemblance to those of the hollow force of the post-Vietnam era. While significant additional cuts to the U.S. defense budget could undoubtedly have a major impact on force structure and weapons programs, senior military leadership plays a significant role in determining how resources are allocated, and avoiding a return to the genuinely hollow forces of the post-Vietnam era may be expected to remain an overarching priority.

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