

# Understanding the Origins of the “Abrams Doctrine”

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RAND

PE-175-RC

September 2015

Prepared for National Commission on Future of the U.S. Army

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## Abstract

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The “Abrams Doctrine” is often used to justify recommendations for Army Total Force policy, such as the proper mix between Regular Army and Reserve Component (RC) force structure. Attributed to General Creighton Abrams, Chief of Staff of the Army between 1972 and 1974, the “Abrams Doctrine” asserts that a significant amount of force structure must be placed in the Army Reserve Components (U.S. Army Reserve and Army National Guard of the United States) so that if the President decides to send the Army to war he must mobilize the RC and thereby ensure the support of the American people for that war. However the primary record does not show that this was what General Abrams was trying to do when he reorganized the Army between 1972 and 1974. Rather, it shows that General Abrams shifted force structure into the RC to allow the Regular Army to increase from 13 to 16 Divisions while staying within a 785,000 manpower cap authorized by Congress. This allowed the Total Army to be large enough to deter Soviet aggression. This paper argues that it is General Abrams’ central idea of tailoring the Total Army for the strategic context facing the nation that should drive Army total force decisions, not an assumption invented more than a decade after Abrams’ death in 1974 on how Army force structure might affect the decisions of future Presidents or the attitudes of the American people—the so-called “Abrams Doctrine.”

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## Understanding the Origins of the “Abrams Doctrine”

Today’s deliberations over the future evolution of the Army’s Total Force Policy are often informed by the alleged “Abrams Doctrine,” named after General Creighton Abrams who was Chief of Staff of the Army from 1972 to 1974. One key tenet of the “Abrams Doctrine” is that the Army must maintain a significant amount of combat and support structure in its Reserve Components (RCs) so that if the President sends the American Army to war he would be forced to mobilize the RCs thereby ensuring the support of the American people. However, there is nothing in primary sources that indicates that Abrams was trying to shape or constrain the actions of future Presidents in this way, nor did his key subordinates and contemporaries believe at that time it was his intent. Rather, all indications are that General Abrams was focused on maintaining adequate Army force structure in the wake of American disengagement from Vietnam and the subsequent downsizing of the service to present a formidable deterrent to Soviet aggression. Indeed, the historical record indicates that the “Abrams Doctrine,” *as it is understood today*, was invented nearly a decade after General Abrams died in 1974.

Yet the “Abrams Doctrine” is often used today to justify policy recommendations affecting Total Army force structure without consideration of whether it was General Abrams’ intent or consideration of whether using it makes sense in today’s strategic context. For example, in recent testimony before the National Commission on the Future of the Army, the Chairman of the Reserve Forces Policy Board, Major General (USMCR Retired) Arnold Punaro, argued that “...there is one constant that should be the strategic underpinning for your decisions: the Abrams Doctrine.”<sup>1</sup> It is thus worth revisiting what General Creighton Abrams actually had in mind when he oversaw the restructuring of the Total Army Force during his tenure as Chief of Staff of the Army; understanding how in the mid-1980s the ideas behind the term “Abrams Doctrine” began to develop (there are similarities between the two, but also differences that policy makers should understand); and most importantly understanding how what he actually was trying to do as well as what the “Abrams Doctrine” purports to apply to force design in the current strategic context.

Between 1972 and 1974 and in the face of declining resources and the advent of the All-Volunteer Force, General Abrams had to reconstitute an Army capable of rapid deployment to Europe in order to serve as a credible deterrent to potential Soviet aggression. In broad outlines, Abrams’ vision was to maximize available combat power through increased reliance on the Army RC, especially combat support and combat service support forces. Applying what Abrams was actually trying to achieve to today’s conditions, however, requires an understanding both of

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<sup>1</sup> Major General Arnold Punaro, USMCR (Ret.), “Written Testimony to the National Commission on the Future of the Army,” Arlington, Va., July 16, 2015; for another expressions of the “Abrams’ Doctrine” that was made available to the National Commission on August 18, 2015 see “National Guard Combat Formations Paper,” *Adjutant Generals Association of the United States (AGAUS)*, August 18, 2015.

how the strategic context has changed and the lessons learned from operational experience over the forty intervening years.

Abrams' actual restructuring program emerged in a specific historical and strategic context. Though not yet over, the Vietnam War was rapidly winding down, Regular Army end strength was being cut approximately by half, and American public opposition to the war remained high. In the war's aftermath, the Army was consumed with the problem of reconstituting a credible deterrent.<sup>2</sup> In 1974, Abrams testified to Congress that current Army force levels in the 1975 budget provide only "a marginal chance of succeeding [in a conflict with the Soviet Union] without the use of nuclear weapons... ultimately we want to get to 16 [divisions], then, the way we look at it now, we will be able to say we have a good chance."<sup>3</sup> In doing so, the Army labored under increasing resource constraints that threatened to limit the Regular Army's size and available combat power.

The end of the draft and congressional constraints weighed heavily on these decisions. According to Abrams' Vice Chief of Staff General Fred Weyand,

Congress was convinced that a smaller sized army was what the no-draft environment would support. It was not until the very end of 1973 that we could see that an Army of about 785,000 was feasible... an Army much greater than that size was not likely to be supported by Congress.<sup>4</sup>

Abrams' Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Lieutenant General D. H. Cowles, recalled that "sixteen [divisions] to me, and I'm convinced to General Abrams, was a reasonable number that we could get in the environment in which we were operating. Similarly, 785,000 was... the best number we thought we could have."<sup>5</sup> Secretary of the Army Howard Callaway testified that

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<sup>2</sup> John L. Romjue, *From Active Defenses to Air Land Battle: The Development of Army Doctrine, 1972-1983*, Historical Office, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 1984.; Paul H. Herbert, "Deciding What Has to be Done: General William E. DePuy and the 1976 Edition of FM 100-5, Operations," *Leavenworth Paper Number 16*, Fort Leavenworth, Kan.: U.S. Army Command and General Staff, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, *Department of Defense Appropriations for 1975: Hearing before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations*, Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, March 5, 1974, pp. 647-648; also see "Interviews with Lieutenant General Donald B. Cowles, December 20, 1975, and General James G. Kalergis, May 26, 1975," in, Senior Officer Debriefing Program, General Creighton Abrams Story, Carlisle, Pa.: U.S. Army Military History Institute.

<sup>4</sup> Unpublished letter from Army Vice Chief of Staff General Fred Weyand, as quoted in: Major Creighton W. Abrams, Jr., "The Sixteen Division Force: Anatomy of a Decision," Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: US Army Command and General Staff College, US Army, June 6, 1975.

<sup>5</sup> "Interview with Lieutenant General D. H. Cowles (Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations under General Abrams) as part of the Senior Officers Debriefing Program," Carlisle, Pa.: U.S. Army Military History Institute, December 1975, p41.

given the “challenge” of the volunteer force, “a significant number above [785,000] would be very difficult under today’s situation.”<sup>6</sup>

The Army’s proposed budget for Fiscal Year (FY) 1975, which began the increase from 13 to 16 divisions, represented Abrams’ approach to dealing with this problem. Abrams also saw the demoralizing effect that the Vietnam War had on the Army and believed that a 16-division Regular Army would help to halt that effect. Having already seen the Regular Army reduced in size by nearly half, Abrams’ priority was to stabilize the Army’s combat strength.<sup>7</sup>

The Army program increased available divisions, even while remaining at the congressionally mandated 785,000 personnel end strength in the Regular Army, by shifting units from the Regular Army into the Reserve and Guard. In doing so, General Abrams was actually continuing a shift of combat support and combat service support structure into the RCs that was begun by his predecessor General William C. Westmoreland.<sup>8</sup> Others also provided key support to this decision, including Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, who himself had adopted the vision of the Total Force Army laid out by his predecessor, Melvin Laird. To flesh out some of these new divisions, Abrams relied on the “roundout” brigade concept, which would substitute an Army National Guard maneuver brigade for a Regular Army maneuver brigade within selected Regular Army divisions.

Combat power was the primary focus during discussions of the 16-division force. Retired Army Chief of Staff General Dennis Reimer, then a lieutenant colonel and General Abrams’ aide, recently recalled that General Abrams’ intent and concept for restructuring the Army after Vietnam was to increase available combat power, as “Abrams was focused on re-orienting the Army on its Cold War mission.”<sup>9</sup> In testimony in 1974 before Congress, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger echoed this reasoning, while Secretary of the Army Callaway stressed that the Army could only attain this desired increase in combat power by relying heavily on the RCs.<sup>10</sup> A lengthy review of Abrams’ decision written in 1975 by his son, then Major Creighton Abrams Jr. (later to become a General Officer), further emphasized that the increase to 16 divisions was undertaken to produce a Regular Army with “more combat units, fewer support units, and fewer

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, *Department of Defense Appropriations for 1975: Hearing before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations*, Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, March 5, 1974, p. 676.

<sup>7</sup> “Interviews with Lieutenant General Donald B. Cowles, December 20, 1975, and General James G. Kalergis, May 26, 1975,” in, Senior Officer Debriefing Program, General Creighton Abrams Story, Carlisle, Pa.: U.S. Army Military History Institute.

<sup>8</sup> Conrad C. Crane, “The Myth of the Abrams Doctrine,” in Jason Warren, ed., *Drawdown: After America’s Wars*, New York, N.Y.: New York University Press, 2016 forthcoming.

<sup>9</sup> General Dennis Reimer, “GEN Reimer Feedback on the Abrams Doctrine,” email, July 27, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, *Department of Defense Appropriations for 1975: Hearing before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations*, Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, August 13, 1974, pp 5-7 and 42-43.

headquarters.”<sup>11</sup> Increasing these divisions’ reliance on the RCs provided much of the manpower and fiscal “savings” that restructuring the Regular Army required.<sup>12</sup>

Abrams died in 1974 without ever publicly articulating the ideas that later became known as the “Abrams Doctrine.” Others have inferred his intentions from the concrete details of the Army’s FY 1975 budget and their own recollections. The first connection between Abrams and what would become the ideas behind the “Abrams Doctrine” was made in a published essay in 1986 by Colonel Harry Summers, who had served on Abrams’ staff and had written an important book critical of the Army in Vietnam. Summers claimed in the 1986 essay that Abrams designed the post-Vietnam Army so that it “could not be committed to sustained combat without mobilization of the reserves.” This was done, according to Summers, to ensure that the Army would never go to war again without the support of the American people. Summers, however, did not provide a source for his assertion of Abrams’ intentions.<sup>13</sup> It also appears that Summers attributed the outcome of Abrams’ reorganization as his motivation, thus erroneously creating the myth of the “Abrams Doctrine.”

Summers’ account would later be cited by other writers in the 1990s, who further cemented the notion that General Abrams had much more on his mind than maintaining a 16-division Regular Army during his short two--year tenure as Chief of Staff of the Army. In 1991, for example, Lewis Sorley claimed that General Abrams’ intention was to place force structure in the Reserve Components so that if the Army was sent to war again, the will of the American people would go along with it. Sorley’s source for this claim was Harry Summer’s 1986 article.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Major Creighton W. Abrams, Jr., “The Sixteen Division Force: Anatomy of a Decision,” Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: US Army Command and General Staff College, US Army, June 6, 1975, p. iii.

<sup>12</sup> Major Creighton W. Abrams, Jr., “The Sixteen Division Force: Anatomy of a Decision,” Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: US Army Command and General Staff College, US Army, June 1975, pp. 38-39.

<sup>13</sup> Harry Summers, “The Army After Vietnam,” in Hagan and Roberts, *Against All Enemies*, 1986, p. 363.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis Sorley, “Creighton Abrams and Active-Reserve Integration in Wartime,” *Parameters*, Summer 1991, p. 46; also see Sorley’s *Thunderbolt: From the Battle of the Bulge to Vietnam, General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times*, New York, N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1992, pp. 364-365; for other examples over time of the assertion that Abrams placed force structure in the RC to force the mobilization of the RC and therefore trigger the support of the American people see: Jim Hoagland, “Congress, Bush, and the Generals,” *The Washington Post*, November 22, 1990; Robert Ensslin, “President’s Message,” *National Guard*, April 1991; James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Officers Born of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War*, Washington D.C.: Potomac Books, 1995, pp. 150-151; Robert Scales, Terry Johnson, Thomas Odom, *Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War*, Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Staff, U.S Army, 1993, p. 18; Michael D. Doubler, *I Am the Guard: Civilian in Peace, Soldier in War*, Department of the Army Pamphlet, Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 2001, p. 242; Reserve Forces Policy Board, *The Annual Report for the Reserve Forces Policy Board for Fiscal Year 2002*, Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, June 25, 2003, p. 12 (also see the annual reports for 2003, p.47 and 2004, p. 44); Richard W. Stewart ed., *American Military History: The United States Army in a Global Era, 1917-2008 (volume II)*, Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, 2010, p. 380; In *Joint Forces Quarterly*, No. 36, December 2004, see the following articles: Lewis Sorley, “Reserve Components: Looking Back to Look Ahead,” p. 22; Dennis M. McCarthy, “The Continuum of Reserve Service,” p. 31; Albert C. Zapanta, “Transforming Reserve Forces,” p. 63,64; US Senate, “Statement of Major General Gus Hargett, ARNG (Ret), President, National Guard Association of the United States before Subcommittee on Defense Committee on

In the years that followed General Abrams' untimely death, a new generation of military leaders reflected on the lessons that could be drawn from the Army's difficult experience in Vietnam. Among the lessons that Army officers drew from the war were the importance of public support for military operations and the perceived danger of gradually escalating a war in the absence of national mobilization.<sup>15</sup> By the early 1980s it became an accepted truism (whether factual or not) of many Army officers that President Lyndon Johnson's decision to rely on the draft rather than call up the Army Reserve and Army National Guard was a critical mistake that not only weakened the Army, but also disconnected it from the American people.<sup>16</sup>

The primary source record is, however, ambiguous on Abrams' view of this issue during the two years he was Chief of Staff of the Army.<sup>17</sup> Abrams never made any public reference to such intent. Instead, noted General Reimer, "Abrams was focused on re-orienting the Army on its Cold War mission." Some individuals had later embraced this as a "doctrine but I do not think that is what [General Abrams] had in mind," recalled Reimer.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the 1975 thesis by General Abrams' son also indicated that his primary objective was to maximize readily available combat power to deter and defeat aggression.

In any case, the idea of the "Abrams Doctrine" forcing the President to mobilize the RCs and thereby ensuring the support of the American people has overshadowed what Abrams actually intended, at least as primary records seem to present it. Recent examples of this extension or misconstruction of General Abrams' stated purpose are still evident. For example, a 2013 article by retired Army Colonel Christopher Holshek asserted that Abrams' intention was to put force structure in the reserve thereby making it "harder to engage in a major war without the support of

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Appropriations," Washington, D.C., June 22, 2011; Ron Jensen, "Guard Roots: The Abrams Doctrine, A Lesson Learned," *National Guard*, November 2012, p. 33-34.

<sup>15</sup> General Fred Weyand and Harry Summers, "Vietnam Myths and American Realities," *CDRS CALL*, July/August 1976; Caspar Weinberger, "The Uses of Military Power," Speech before the National Press Club, Washington, D.C., November 28, 1984.

<sup>16</sup> Harry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, 1982; James T. Currie, "The Army Reserve and Vietnam," *Parameters*, 1984; for a thorough description of this attitude by army officers in the decade after the Vietnam War see David H. Petraeus, *The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam: A Study of Military Influence and the Use of Force in the Post-Vietnam Era*, Doctoral Dissertation, Princeton University, 1987. For two excellent histories of President Johnson and the Vietnam War see Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Ivan R. Dee, 1995); and George Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> Our research has turned up no references or evidence from the primary record showing that Abrams by placing so much force structure in the RC would act as a mechanism to force the President to mobilize the RC and thereby ensuring the support of the American people, which is currently understood to be the key element of the "Abrams Doctrine." For three scholarly writings that support the argument that using the RC as a way to force the President to mobilize the RC was *not* part of Abram's actual intent see: James Jay Carafano, "The Army Reserves and the Abrams Doctrine: Unfilled Promises, Uncertain Future," *Heritage Lectures*, (December 6, 2004); Conrad C. Crane, "The Myth of the Abrams Doctrine," in Jason Warren, ed. *Drawdown: After America's Wars*, New York: NYU Press, 2016 (forthcoming); and Jill A. Rough, *Is the Abrams Doctrine Valid: Exploring the Impact of Army National Guard Mobilization on Public Support for the War on Terror*, PhD Dissertation, George Mason University, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> General Dennis Reimer, "GEN Reimer Feedback on the Abrams Doctrine," email, July 27, 2015.

the American people.”<sup>19</sup> We have already noted Major General Punaro’s invocation of the “Abrams Doctrine,” articulated as “the Army should not go to war unless the nation goes to war, and the nation goes to war only if the Guard and Reserve are mobilized to join the fight.”<sup>20</sup> Advocates of this interpretation cite this aspect of the “Abrams Doctrine” in support of other policies that may or may not stem from it.<sup>21</sup>

Whether or not General Abrams intended his policies to require future Presidents to ensure America’s willingness to go to war before committing troops, he clearly intended to maximize the Army’s rapidly employable combat power. To the extent that the “Abrams Doctrine” continues to guide the Departments of Defense and Army, its implications and application certainly should evolve over time. The Army has integrated RC forces into operations from Operation Desert Shield forward; at times this has been successful, but at other times challenging.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, it is important to note that the strategic context in which the Army operates and is organized has changed over time, resulting in different calculations of costs and risks. Understanding how conditions have changed and are likely to change further will be critical to the successful adaptation of what Abrams had originally intended from his historical era to the strategic environment we face today – that is, how to generate and rapidly employ sufficient combat power during a period of constrained resources. The extent to which Abrams’ original intent for restructuring the Army and the later developed “Abrams Doctrine” should guide the Army’s future is a question that needs to be thought through carefully.

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<sup>19</sup> Christopher Holshek, “Preserve the Reserves: Why America Needs its Citizen-Soldiers Now More than Ever,” *Foreign Policy*, March 15, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Major General Arnold Punaro, USMCR (Ret.), “Written Testimony to the National Commission on the Future of the Army,” Arlington, Va., July 16, 2015; for another expressions of the “Abrams’ Doctrine” that was made available to the National Commission on August 18, 2015 see “National Guard Combat Formations Paper,” *Adjutant Generals Association of the United States (AGAUS)*, August 18, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> See for example Adjutant Generals Association of the United States (AGAUS) “National Guard Combat Formations Paper,” August 18, 2015, presented to the National Commission on the Future of the Army. For a scholarly argument that discredits the claim that Army RC use in war ensures American public support see Jill A. Rough, *Is the Abrams Doctrine Valid: Exploring the Impact of Army National Guard Mobilization on Public Support for the War on Terror*, PhD Dissertation, George Mason University, 2004, p. 107.

<sup>22</sup> General Accounting Office (GAO) Report to Congressional Committees, *Army National Guard Combat Brigades’ Ability to be Ready for War in Ninety Days is Uncertain*, June 1995; and GAO Report to Secretary of the Army, *National Guard: Peacetime Training Did Not Adequately Prepare Combat Brigades for Gulf War*, September 1991.

## About This Paper

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This paper is a shortened version of a longer essay soon to be published in a professional military journal. This essay is also backed up by ongoing research for a three volume RAND history of American military policy sponsored by HQDA.

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