

News and views

Reserve Forces Act of 1955

THE Reserve Forces Act of 1955 has been placed on the statutes and thus the military manpower program of the nation has been settled for a time—possibly a long time. It seems unlikely that the Congress will open up these touchy issues short of a gathering international storm. The present legislation could be with us a long time.

Nevertheless it is considered good legislation by few commentators. It was intended to provide for the building up of an adequate, trained reserve immediately available for service in emergency so that another time there would be no need for the sudden recall of veterans, as in 1950. At best the new law only goes a short way in this direction. It does provide that those who enter reserve status (after the date of enactment of the legislation) are subject to positive penalties for failure to meet reserve obligations for training, thus putting some teeth into reserve training requirements. It does provide that a limited number (200,000 annually) who are released from active duty after one year may enlist in the Ready Reserve and fulfill their military obligation in a shorter time than the six year period generally applicable to most young men under the new law. It does permit young men prior to age 18½ to enlist in a reserve component and escape active service, although their total obligation is then up to age 28. Finally, it permits young men up to 18½ years of age to enlist for a period of basic training (3 to 6 months to be determined by the Secretary of Defense) and then to serve in an active reserve program for 7½ additional years.

These several avenues are obviously established in the hope that some or all of these choices may provide a channel of traffic into a burgeoning reserve force capable of meeting the demands of possible military crisis of the future. There is no single provision for what a civil defense crisis might require. It is safe to say that the bill leaves something to be desired.

With respect to specialized personnel, however, the bill does register certain clear gains with respect to a national viewpoint on service obligation. It does recognize that there are critical civilian skills and that the military strength of the nation requires that a due proportion of them should be released for civilian needs. This is manifest in the provision that "members of the Reserve Forces possessing critical civilian skills will

not be retained in numbers beyond the requirements for those skills except for persons who have military skills for which there is an overriding requirement" [Sec. 208 (k)(3)]. To insure the above continuous screening procedures by the Department of Defense are made mandatory.

A second provision affecting specialized personnel is Sec. 262 (b)(3). Section (b) follows:

"(b) Enlistments under this section may be accepted from persons who—

"(1) are physically and mentally qualified for service in the Armed Forces;

"(2) have not been ordered to report for induction into the Armed Forces under the Universal Military Training and Service Act; and

"(3) have not attained the age of eighteen years and six months.

"In addition, the President, under such rules and regulations as he may prescribe, may authorize the enlistment under this section, without regard to the provisions of paragraphs (2) and (3), of persons who fulfill the requirements of paragraph (1) and who have critical skills and are engaged in civilian occupations in any critical defense-supporting industry or in any research activity affecting national defense."

In general, therefore, it may be said that the new law, as regards specialized personnel, adds new features. Persons may elect to enlist in a reserve component, if under 18½, take three to six months training, then join a reserve unit. However, if they then pursue training in a profession or skill recognized as critical, they may be screened out to the Standby Reserves under the provisions of Sec. 208.

Or, a young man may elect to pursue his studies under the student deferment program. If he then emerges as a specialist in a category considered to be possessed of critical civilian skills, he may be authorized to enlist in a reserve component, first taking his three to six months training. Thereafter he becomes subject to screening under Sec. 208.

It is notable that whereas in general throughout the legislation regulations are prescribed either by the Secretary of Defense or the appropriate secretary of one of the armed forces, in Sec. 208 and Sec. 262 the act specifically lodges this authority in the President.

Obviously, much of the significance of these provisions will depend on the manner and the spirit of their administration. It is, therefore, worthy of note that the intent of Congress, as indicated by the remarks of Congressmen in the various hearings on the bill, is unusually clear, even though the actual wording of the legislation seems not to depart so drastically from the past. Indications are that the administration is prepared to follow in the lead of the Congress in this respect.

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