Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

In Air Force and Department of Defense (DoD) force-structure decisionmaking, each element of the total force—active, Air Force Reserve (AFR), and the Air National Guard (ANG)—has proponents that often seek to maximize the resources devoted to it. Proponents include senior leadership within the components, Congress, and stakeholders external to DoD, such as associations that advocate the interests of the various components. In this oftentimes competitive environment, resource allocation decisions would better support public interests if they were guided by a set of principles for maximizing a total Air Force contribution to national defense.

Moreover, the force mix has changed significantly during the last decade. Figure 1.1 shows that active component (AC) strength reductions were proportionally greater than reserve component (RC) strength reductions during the last decade (which has shifted the mix toward a greater proportion in the RC). In fiscal year (FY) 1988, the two RCs—the ANG and the AFR—together constituted 25 percent of total Air Force strength and 11 percent of total operating costs. In FY 1998, the RC constituted 33 percent of the total strength and 16 percent of the total cost. In our review of the literature and in our interviews with AC and RC decisionmakers, we found no evidence that this shift occurred as part of a conscious force-mix strategy. Rather, it occurred as a result of many decisions, taken independently, regarding active component (AC) and reserve component (RC) force structure. We argue that there are good reasons for mak-
Principles for Determining the Air Force Active/Reserve Mix

Figure 1.1—Strengths and Operating Costs

ing force-structure decisions affecting the force mix in an integrated rather than an independent way.

Generally, rational deliberations of the force mix have focused on three factors—cost, military effectiveness, and availability. As the data in Figure 1.1 suggest, and as will be demonstrated in more detail later in the report, force structure costs less in the RC than in the AC. Additionally, Air Force RC units, in contrast to some reserve forces in other services, generally meet or exceed AC levels of military
effectiveness. However, reserve forces are less available than active forces—except in small numbers, they cannot be deployed as rapidly as active forces; there are strict statutory limits on how and for how long they may be called up involuntarily for active duty; and there are practical limits on how long and how often they can be employed voluntarily.

These considerations can be combined to form an implicit principle for determining a cost-effective force mix—maximize the RC proportion, subject to satisfying availability demands that generally require active forces.

However, unit operating costs, military effectiveness, and availability are not the only considerations that apply in determining an appropriate force mix. There is also the issue—understood but often intangible—of how reserve forces help to meet certain social and political objectives important to the Air Force and DoD and how the RC captures valuable experience and expertise that would otherwise be lost. In addition, it is necessary to understand why the flow of human capital from active to reserve forces must be kept within feasible bounds. Finally, it is important to understand cost considerations in a disaggregated way; in other words, does the type of mission being performed favor one component over the other?

**OBJECTIVES AND APPROACH**

In preparing this report, we sought to answer the following questions:

- What principles should be considered in force-structure decisions that affect the active/reserve mix?
- How do these principles interact with one another?

In reviewing previous studies or commentaries on force-mix issues, we found that the relevant principles are generally recognized but have not necessarily been assembled into a coherent framework. We also found that some principles have been articulated for military forces in general, and thus need to be tailored to the Air Force case.

In addressing the second question, we noted that the principles generally do not prescribe a specific active/reserve mix. Rather, they
tend to suggest constraints—the proportions of the mix should be above or below some specified boundary, which may vary as a function of total force size or other factor. When considered simultaneously, these constraints may define a feasible region within which a range of force-mix possibilities would be acceptable.

**PERSPECTIVE**

In proposing and discussing these principles, we have observed that AC, AFR, and ANG representatives, and their advocates outside of the Air Force, tend to see the issues through different lenses. We have attempted to avoid a component-specific viewpoint, basing our proposed principles on an overall objective of maximizing the Air Force’s contribution to national defense. For most of the principles we advocate, that amounts to optimizing the distribution of available resources within the Air Force’s total force.

When examining social and political issues, we find that the operant objective is to enhance the Air Force’s posture for claiming resources (funds, manpower, policy license, political support, etc.) from the larger society. The possibility exists that success in this endeavor could come at the expense of the other services, of domestic programs, or of other social interests. Evaluating these welfare economic implications is beyond the scope of our study. Consequently, the perspective we adopt in evaluating social and political issues is not an economic one. Rather, we take an organizational ecology perspective—military organizations will not obtain needed resources if they fail to cultivate appropriate linkages to the larger society. The worthy objective, we believe, is not to maximize Air Force resources through political manipulation but to maximize the quality of the Air Force’s linkages to the larger society, relying on the democratic process to govern the resource outcomes.

**SCOPE**

The end product in this research is not a specific force mix. As we shall demonstrate, the appropriate force mix is contingent on a number of variable factors. Our objective is to identify the relevant principles, leaving to decisionmakers and their staffs the task of applying the principles in specific force-structuring actions.
ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

Chapter Two describes in general terms the broad factors we have found to be important in force-mix decisions and provides a model to enable the factors to be considered simultaneously. In Chapters Three through Six, we discuss the implications of these factors in greater detail, showing—based on our analysis—where the locus of each factor or constraint is in the model. Chapter Seven gives our conclusions and recommendations.