



# Q & A

Another conversation with  
Lt. Gen. H Steven Blum  
National Guard Bureau chief

## We have a diminished capability to respond.

Ask Lt. Gen. H Steven Blum about issues confronting the National Guard today and, invariably, the conversation turns to equipment.

And for good reason: Most Army Guard and Air Guard units lack the Humvees, trucks and other dual-use gear they need to quickly and effectively handle domestic crises.

The Guard Bureau chief says the issue isn't whether the Guard will respond. It's about speed. Time will be lost either gathering the proper equipment or trying to complete a job without the right tools. And time lost, he says, means lives lost.

This is General Blum's primary message these days, and he pulls no punches—whether speaking to a Guard association, the media or lawmakers on Capitol Hill. Anything less, he says, would be “dereliction of duty” on his part.

Such candor is opening eyes in Washington, with one senator recently calling the equipment problem a “national crisis.”

General Blum, who now is entering his fifth year as chief, sat down with NATIONAL GUARD magazine last month to discuss a range of issues. And it didn't take long for him to offer a cause, effect and solution to what he considers the biggest obstacle facing not only the Guard, but the defense of the homeland.

**Q** About 18 months ago the Army National Guard had 333,000 soldiers, or 17,000 fewer than its authorized end strength. You said then that the Army Guard could restore its personnel strength. Many in the Pentagon, however, openly doubted you. But today the Army Guard, indeed, has 350,000 soldiers. How did that happen?

**A** Three-hundred, fifty thousand plus. It happened. I was very confident it was going to happen as long as we were provided the resources in order to accomplish the mission. With the help of the Congress, frankly, we were able to get those resources and put them to good use. And now the Army National Guard is the most efficient, most cost-effective recruiting machine of all the land components. We produce more numbers for less money, more numbers of enlistments for less money and higher quality [recruits] than any of our peer competitors.

There is no secret to why this happens. It's because we are a word-of-mouth recruited force where our members seek and attract new members and basically guarantee the quality of the members that they bring into their unit. So, we are quite selective of whom we extend the invitation to, and that has produced a very committed, quality force and arguably the best this nation has seen in 371 years of the militia or citizen-soldier National Guard.

And we're postured to grow. We're not stopping at 350,000. We are already through that, we're almost into 351,000, and I expect us to be at 360,000 in less than a year. And the reason that we should grow is, number one,

we can, and number two, the nation needs us to grow. The requirements for the National Guard are not going to go down over the next year, they are continuing to increase. And unless we are going to wear out our citizen-soldiers, their families and their employers, it makes sense to grow the force.

**Q** Most of the Guard recruiting and retention numbers appear very positive. One area trending negatively—at least in some states—is traditional, part-time members getting out once they qualify for retirement. Some adjutants general have said that they are losing a lot of experienced NCOs, warrant officers and senior captains and majors. What is being done to keep good people serving beyond 20 years?

**A** A lot of things that are being done, but I don't see this as a monumental problem right now. Our retention rates are about 116 percent of goal, so we are re-enlisting the most experienced, most committed, most professional force that the Guard has ever seen. This is all counter-intuitive. All the conventional wisdom said we would be broken or [are] being stretched to the max, and we were going to break the Guard. We are not breaking the Guard. The Guard, personnel-wise, is stronger than it has ever been.

The only place the Guard is broken is in the amount of equipment we have back at home. Overseas, we are equipped exactly like the very best units on active duty, but back here at home we paid a terrible price to make that happen. We were under-equipped to begin with, and we've continually cross-leveled that equipment for now almost six years, and we are reaching an unacceptably low level of equipping our force back here at home.

The Congress has been informed of what it will take to solve the problem, and we have asked for that help. So, we have done everything a military leader can do or Guard leadership can do. It is now up to the Congress to do its constitutionally established role, and that is to equip the force so that we have the tools in our hands to do the job that we're called upon to do. That is, to respond tonight on no-notice in any zip code in this nation. We have got to have that critical equipment in our hands.

We don't need everything but certainly need 100 percent of the equipment that falls into the 10 essential capability areas: command and control, engineer, logistics, maintenance, aviation, medical, communications, security, so forth.

**Q** The Guard has long operated under the credo: "Always ready. Always there." And almost every week, Guard personnel and equipment are out assisting local authorities.

**A** Every single day we have 12,500 National Guardsmen deployed, responding at the orders of their governors to natural disasters and other domestic missions around this nation. People don't realize that. That's almost four brigades worth of soldiers doing their jobs in our nation for our governors. That would be 6,500 people on top of Operation Jump Start.

**Q** But with today's equipment shortages, is the Guard truly able to respond to the full range of potential domestic-response contingencies?

**A** I think so. [But] it makes it much more difficult. It makes our response time a little slower. That doesn't sound too bad, but it's awful because time equals lives—lives saved or lives lost. How quickly you can respond is a very significant factor on how many lives are either saved or lost. Any delay in that time means a loss of lives, and those lives are American lives.

So, there are a lot of people who ask, "Wow, how much will it take to make the Guard well?" And I put it at \$38, almost \$40 billion [above programmed amounts] over the next six years. That's what it's going to take to make the Army and Air Guard fully ready to do what we're describing, to meet the expectations of the American people. And there are people who say, "We can't afford \$40 billion to equip the Guard." And to them I answer, "You can't afford not to equip the National Guard. This nation cannot afford a National Guard that is not fully equipped and fully capable to respond here in the homeland."

**Q** Funding is the key to mitigating the Guard's equipment and other readiness shortfalls. The Army and Air Force also appear to have funding challenges, just to a lesser degree. This begs a question: Is the nation committing enough resources to defense?

What's more important than defending the homeland? What piece of ground on earth is more important to defend than where we live?

**A** I think not. I think not. I think we have been comfortable with a paradigm that assumes significant risk for the forces that are back here at the homeland. The model for so many decades was that we were protected by our oceans and the vast expanse of our nation. I think everybody today is cognizant of the fact that we are vulnerable to an attack right here on the homeland, and it's not necessarily going to be a conventional attack. It can be an irregular warfare attack. It could be a terrorist series of attacks. It could be more than one attack. It could be multiple near-simultaneous attacks all across the

nation, and they would be varying kind of threats, varying kind of attacks.

The National Guard has to be ready for that worst-case scenario, and to do anything that would leave us unable to respond to that is unconscionable. And it would be dereliction of duty on my part not to bring it to the attention of Congress that we are in a position where we have a diminished capability to respond. I think we owe it to the families and the neighbors and the friends and the community members of our fellow Guardsmen so that we are always ready, always there. And the most important place to be always ready and always there is right there where you live in your own zip code, your own neighborhood, your own community in your own state or territory.

## The Air Guard cannot be viewed and dealt with as a second Air Force Reserve.

**Q** You've said the Army has committed billions of dollars to help equip and modernize the Army Guard over the next six years. What assurances are in place to ensure these dollars actually purchase equipment that reaches Army Guard units?

**A** The truth is there are no assurances right now. And that's one of the issues that I think our leadership should keep on the front burner for Congress so that proper controls are established, that the money that was appropriated and intended to buy Guard equipment, gets used to buy Guard equipment. There should be a system that allows every taxpayer to track and see if dollars appropriated for Guard equipment actually end up in equipment at some National Guard motor pool, armory or airfield. I think we owe that to the American taxpayers if we don't owe it to ourselves.

And right now, that does not exist, except for the very specific items that are bought through the [congressional] National Guard and Reserve Equipment Account. Those we can track. Those we have 100 percent visibility over. Those we have 100 percent accountability that we bought exactly what we said we were going to buy, and we bought it for the intended purpose and we fielded it exactly where we said we're going to send them. But that's the only program that guarantees anything. Anything else is anything less than a guarantee.

**Q** The March 1 interim report of the Commission on the National Guard and Reserves called for sweeping changes in the way the Pentagon funds and treats the Guard. Of

the report, commission Chairman Arnold L. Punaro said, "Our whole set of recommendations is to give the National Guard greater clout and influence." Where could the Guard use more clout and influence within the Pentagon?

**A** It's not so much clout as it is input so that the policies and the implementation plans really take into consideration the myriad unique civilian-employer and personal-situation nuances that exist in the National Guard that do not exist in the active component.

So, if the policies are developed by people who really only understand and have life experiences in the active component, you are going to have an active solution to every problem, and that doesn't always necessarily fit the Guard and Reserve. In fact, in most cases it does not fit the Guard and Reserve because it's an apple solution for an orange problem.

Many of the legislators have said, "General Blum, if you don't have a seat at the table, you are probably on the menu." Now, whether it's intended for you to be on the menu or not, the second or third order of consequences are that you probably

end up on the menu because you weren't in there at the time the decisions were made or at the time when the inputs were made to the decision-makers.

And to go back to try to get a decision reversed or modified is far harder than to be there to provide the right input at the right time before the decision is made so that it can be better for the [entire] Total Force rather than an active-component solution for the Total Force.

Unfortunately, history is replete with well-intended decisions that were nearly catastrophic for the Guard and Reserve, because no one from the Guard and Reserve was there to provide input into how to come up with a solution to fit the Guard and Reserve. So, the Punaro commission recognizes this as decades-old ... problem. It recognizes that the solution for this is not to continue to do things as we've done for the last 40 or 50 years, but to start looking at how to do things differently.

**Q** The governors, many in Congress and now the Commission on the National Guard Reserves believe domestic military requirements get short shrift at the Pentagon. What is your perspective?

**A** I think that's largely true. It's starting to change, but the change is slow. To me, what's more important than defending the homeland? What piece of ground on earth is more important to defend than where we live? Whose family is it more important to provide safety and security to than our own? To me, it's a very simple decision. It should not be last thing we fund; it should be the first thing we fund.

**Q** You served as chief of staff of the U.S. Northern Command before taking over as NGB chief. It's a command that will rely heavily on the Guard in any operational scenario. Is the Guard adequately represented within the command on a day-to-day basis?

**A** Not really. Northern Command is more dependent on the National Guard than any other combatant command around the globe. It's essential that Northern Command be heavily populated with people with deep experience and broad knowledge on the National Guard. Otherwise, Northern Command becomes a very much-needed, well-intended combatant command that's operating with almost a blindfold on. Their ability to see and know and hear and anticipate is greatly diminished if we don't totally integrate the National Guard within the command.

We have to be able to operate seamlessly in times of a crisis with all elements of the National Guard, DoD and Northern Command. Right now, we are working very hard to make that happen, but we're not there to where we need to be. There is lots more that can be done, and the Guard can play an extremely important role in Northern Command. We set the foundation for their success, to be quite honest with you. We provide the forward presence to the situational awareness. We provide the joint reception, staging and integration capability for Title 10 forces to come into any state or territory. We are tremendous enabler and act as, literally, a foundation for their capabilities for land response in CONUS.

**Q** The 2005 Base Realignment and Closure process clearly took its toll on what once was a great working relationship between the Air Guard and the Air Force. Two years later, where do you see this relationship heading?

**A** It needs to head in a very positive direction. This is too serious a time for our nation to fracture the Total Air Force, to have our Air Force have a family feud, to put the families at

risk and the nation at risk. This is a time for unity, effort and teamwork. [But] I am committed and [Lieutenant] General [Craig] McKinley [Air Guard director] is committed to making sure that we don't give away the equities of the Air National Guard.

We are both also committed to moving forward and making the Air National Guard part of the Total Air Force, without—and this is important—losing the uniqueness of the citizen-airman, and the dual mission capability that the Air National Guard brings to every governor around this country.

The Air Guard cannot be viewed and dealt with as a second Air Force Reserve. It has to be viewed as the Air National Guard and a dual mission force just as we view the Army National Guard. The governors of the nation see it the same way, and the 54 adjutants general see it this way.

**Q** One of the keys to reviving flying units grounded by BRAC seems to be the quick acquisition and fielding of the Joint Cargo Aircraft. There are, however, signs the Army and Air Force differ on the development of this program. Do you believe the JCA may be in trouble from a joint perspective?

**A** No. I just came from a meeting on the very issue. I am more optimistic than ever that the Army and Air Force will buy exactly the same aircraft, that it will be a joint program, that it will have a joint concept of operation, and that a substantial number of these aircraft—both Army and Air Force purchased JCAs—will come to the National Guard.

And then we will form joint airlift units around the country, bed them down at Air National Guard bases where the infrastructure is already in place, and we will distribute the planes around this nation so that we will have the capability to

**JOINT EFFORT** Kentucky Army National Guard soldiers board a Kentucky Air Guard C-130 Hercules transport plane en route to Southwest border duty last summer.



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**ANOTHER RESPONSE** Members of the Massachusetts National Guard patrol past shops closed due to flooding in Peabody, Mass., last year.

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respond for any future Katrinas or similar disasters.

**Q** Very little is said about Air Guard participation in new weapons systems as the Air Force modernizes and divests legacy airframes. How do you see the Air Guard with regard to flying missions in the future?

**A** I think we are going to have to take a hard look at the Air Guard and balance our forces just as we did in the Army Guard. It was painful, but we now have a very balanced Army National Guard—about one-third combat, one-third combat support, one-third combat service support. It makes us able to sustain our forces overseas and retain our capabilities to respond back here at home.

We can do both simultaneously, and we can do both indefinitely if we do it in a prudent manner. In the Air Guard we are disproportionately invested, in my view, in fighters. Fifty-six percent of the portfolio of the Air Guard is in fighters. I think we are too heavily invested in fighter aircraft, and too lightly invested in transport aircraft and tankers. General McKinley and I, in the future, will be working with the adjutants general to come to a more balanced arrangement of forces and capabilities in our Air Guard. We've left that on autopilot for too long.

**Q** What assurances are there that all of the units “enclaved” by the Base Realignment and Closure process will receive relevant new missions?

**A** I'm committed to that. General McKinley is committed to that, and I think the Air Force is committed to that—to assisting us with that. [Those are the] assurances I have given the adjutants general and the governors, and I intend to deliver on those assurances.

**Q** In January, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates announced the new 12-month mobilization policy for Army Guard and Reserve units. The change greatly reduces the time available for post-mobilization training, shifting many training requirements to the premobilization period. This is significant change in the way Army Guard units go to war. How are the Army and the Army Guard adapting?

This new policy will force substantial dollars to train, substantial monies to hire full-time trainers and full-time National Guardsmen to the [mobilizing] units so that they can reduce their time necessary to train after they're called up before mobilizing. And it will require the most modern equipment be in the hands of our National Guard units before they're mobilized, so they don't have to spend weeks and months after mobilization learning how to operate and maintain equipment they should have had in their hands years before they were called, certainly months and weeks before they were called.

So, it will be a new paradigm. It will take us a little while to move from the old paradigm—the Industrial Age mobilization model that we knew for 50 years—to what Secretary Gates has courageously and rightfully announced. It is certainly something we have asked for, strongly advocated for, and he has now seen and listened and heard our arguments and sees the value in it. He made a courageous decision to adopt this new policy, which will shorten our time [of] boots on the ground, and it will shorten our time away from home from our families, and it will shorten the time away from our jobs.

All of these things, I think, are strategically essential to maintain an all-volunteer National Guard in the 21st century, so we can always be ready, and if necessary, always be there. In any event, the policy will end up providing you a more capable, better trained and more ready National Guard over time whether your deployed or not, and that's what this nation needs and deserves and expects.

**Q** How much time do you think it will take to shift what has been the go-to-war methodology of the Army Guard?

**A** We're shifting it right now while we're talking. As far as I'm concerned, that policy went into effect on 11 January. On 12 January, we went to work to make it work, and we're working hard right now. And we're not looking back, and that's slipping back to old way. That is not going to happen.

**Q** Another part of the new policy means that all Army Guard soldiers are eligible for recall. In some cases, soldiers will redeploy without the five years of dwell time that are [an] objective of the Army force generation model. There are those who say that even a slightly larger Army and Army Guard is still too small to provide the dwell-time goals in the ARFORGEN model. What is your view?

**A** I think they're right. It's a matter of supply and demand. The enemy is putting a demand on us; the supply is what we have. We have two ways to slow this wheel down. You either lower the demand, and if the enemy allows that, that's fine. But if they don't, then we're going to meet their demands. It just means that we are going to have to turn the supply wheel just a little bit faster than we would like. The National Guard has never failed this nation in 371 years of its existence. I'm talking about the existence of the Guard. We were protecting our settlements and our colonies before we were a nation, and we have never failed our nation. And I don't expect this 21st century breed of Minutemen and women to fail our nation.

So, if we have to go to war sooner than once every five years, so be it. Nobody is going to like it, but we're a ready, reliable, accessible and essential National Guard today. And that's the cost to always being always ready and always there. And our citizen-soldiers and airmen know this, and are willing to accept that challenge. All they ask is that they have the training and tools to do the job, so that they can come back with their buddies safe and sound and go back to being citizen-soldiers until the next time they are needed.

**Q** On April 9 the Pentagon alerted four Army Guard brigade combat teams for an accelerated deployment to Iraq. It was thought that these BCTs would train, deploy and fight as intact brigades. But shortly after the alert, the units were notified that they will be used piecemeal in Iraq. What is happening with these units?

**A** That's not going to happen. Those brigades are going with the brigade headquarters and brigade leadership, and they are going to be given a brigade mission or they won't go. It's non-negotiable. We've done it wrong for too long.

General [Clyde] Vaughn [Army Guard director] and I have made it very clear to the Army leadership and anyone else who wants to challenge it that there are no security-force companies in the Army and Marine Corps, and there sure are none in the Guard.

There are battalions, there are companies, and there are battalions and brigades. If you want to give that brigade a mission, then that brigade will be happy to take a security mission, but it will do it as a battalion or brigade task force. We are going over there as a doctrinal configuration and modular configuration. We are going to do the mission under the chain of command that train together, live together and go fight together, and then come home together.

**Q** There has been a lot of talk lately in the media and on Capitol Hill about the force being broken. We know you get the questions: "Is the force stressed? Is the force broken?" What is your response to that?

History is replete with well-intended decisions that were nearly catastrophic for the Guard and Reserve because no one from the Guard and Reserve was there to provide input.

**A** The force is definitely stressed—to include the Guard—but that doesn't mean that we are broken. I think the stress that we have been under the last several years is sort of like taking a piece of iron and heating it and hammering it. And what happens to it? It gets harder and stronger. I think what you have seen is an iron National Guard five or six years ago that under the stress has become high-carbon steel.

The Guard is stronger now than it was five or six years ago. The Guard is much more capable than it was five or six years ago. And the only thing it lacks at this point is equipment, and that's the easiest problem to solve: authorize and appropriate some money and put it into an account that can't be diverted, taxed, robbed. Put it into an account that the can be protected so that the Guard gets the equipment that Congress appropriates and authorizes, and you will have high-carbon steel men and women that are willing and capable of doing anything that this country asks them. The only thing they ever ask of their county is for the tools to do the job that they're asked to do. This nation is the richest nation on earth, and what we are asking for is not unreasonable. To not give it to us is unconscionable. ♣