

The Department of Defense's Personnel Reliability Program: The Emperor Has No Clothes!

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The Department of Defense (DOD) uses the Personnel Reliability Program to screen and monitor individuals who have access to nuclear weapons. The cornerstone of the program involves reporting potentially disqualifying activities or issues—whether occurring on duty or off duty—that might cast doubt on someone's ability or reliability with regard to performing duties related to nuclear ordnance. The most common examples include criminal incidents, mental health / medical problems, and financial irresponsibility. Such disqualifying information can lead to temporary or permanent suspension from working with these weapons.

The program emerged in response to a string of nuclear accidents/incidents prior to 1962 that were undermining the American public's trust in the military's management of nuclear devices. Gen Curtis LeMay, commander of Strategic Air Command, created the program to help communicate a public affairs message that only the best people had access to these weapons. He wished to convey the idea that the DOD would not grant such access until personnel had undergone both screening of their personnel/medical records and vetting for a Secret security clearance. These individuals were also subject to the program's ongoing monitoring. However, because the screening process

lacked both objectivity and a zero-strikes requirement, some service members with a history of crime and/or drug use prior to enlisting gained entrance to the program. This occurs because individual unit commanders administer the program, judging someone's history on the basis of his or her personal experience and bias. Although most certifications by commanders meet the intent of the bell curve, outliers appear on the left and right—some service members are denied admission to the program even though they deserve it, and others not worthy of approval are admitted. This fact undermines General LeMay's message that the DOD entrusts "only" the best personnel with its most powerful weapons. From the very beginning, that has clearly not been the case.

Air Force Global Strike Command utilizes a set of standard briefing slides as mandatory indoctrination material for all people undergoing initial certification in the reliability program. Yet, that information offers no historical evidence or lessons learned that demonstrate how personnel reliability could have prevented an accident/incident prior to 1962 or since the inception of the program. Management at the highest levels cannot quantify the program's impact on nuclear surety.

Results

In August 2007, after 45 years of implementing, streamlining, and indoctrinating the reliability program throughout the DOD, the Air Force

lost six nuclear warheads, violating all nuclear protocols, security, and administration. This incident resulted in the firing of the commanders of a squadron, two groups, and a wing, as well as four senior noncommissioned officers. An additional 25 personnel received punishment. Obviously, the reliability program failed to predict either this gross occurrence or the failures of 33 personnel who performed critical nuclear duties. If the program were even marginally effective, how could it not foresee the aberrant behavior of so many people? The answer is that the reliability program is totally incapable of such predictions—a fact proven by statistical evidence across the services.

The judge advocate general's criminal and discharge statistics from Global Strike Command, together with its predecessors Air Combat Command and Air Force Space Command, show that the number of criminal offenders and punitive discharges per 1,000 personnel are on par with data across the Air Force. This holds true for any year over the histories of the commands. If only the best people work with nuclear weapons, then the commands that have those devices should reflect higher performance with regard to basic discipline and adherence to military and civil law. The judge advocate's statistics, however, show that this is not the case. The majority of the Air Force serves as a "control group" made up of individuals who have lower security clearances (or none at all) and who undergo no intense monitoring; nevertheless, they

perform as well as personnel in the minority “test group” who have higher security clearances and are subject to program scrutiny.

Costs

The reliability program places a heavy burden on nuclear wings. Specifically, each hospital carries an average of one to three doctors plus an administrative staff of two to four people who manage a full-time office for the reliability program. Furthermore, three to five other doctors and three to four dentists usually carry additional duties related to the program. Additionally, each nuclear squadron includes two or three people dedicated to managing daily program notifications. Each nuclear wing has a reliability program office run by two or three personnel who oversee implementation of the program throughout the wing. Global Strike Command utilizes three or four inspectors who travel to each of the nuclear sites to conduct inspections/exercises of wing programs. Conservatively, each wing spends \$2 million a year on labor alone, not including the cost of filling most squadron positions “out of hide” by removing service members from their core duties, thereby effectively doubling the workload of an equal number of line personnel.

Each year a records audit occurs for each member of the reliability program, resulting in an average of three months annually that the hospital and base reliability program officers examine historical documents for evidence of errors. Essentially, for 90 days these

individuals remain at a zero-productivity rate for the sole purpose of determining when they failed to report disqualifying information that had no bearing on the actual reliability of program participants who served without incident. About every 12–18 months, the major command or DOD will conduct a 10 percent records audit, repeating this zero-productivity rate and historical affirmation that unreported disqualifying information had no effect on the service of program personnel. Again, a conservative estimate of labor costs alone per wing comes to \$250,000 a year.

Recommendation

The reliability program is not completely without merit. It requires competent medical authorities to discuss with unit commanders the medical suitability of program personnel for service—a process not demanded of people who do not participate. In the case of service members experiencing mental health issues, commanders can enter the observe, orient, decide, act loop to offer help before their people suffer a catastrophic incident such as suicide. Because commanders are held accountable for all of their service members' actions, both on and off duty, they must become involved in these people's lives. The privilege of medical disclosure enjoyed by reliability-program commanders should be extended to all commanders so that they can meet expectations more effectively.

As for the rest of the screening, documentation, inspection, and daily management requirements of the reliability program—the DOD should terminate them, and persons involved in such management should return to their core duties. Moreover, otherwise eligible personnel should be considered for service in nuclear units. The resulting assignment flexibility would spread the nuclear standard for adherence to technical orders and instructions throughout the total force over time.

Conclusion

In a time of financial and manpower constraints, the services cannot support personnel programs that offer no evidence of success or effectiveness over a 50-year history. Challenging the nuclear tradition may seem sacrilegious in a time that extols all things Strategic Air Command and General LeMay—but the personnel reliability program has failed to clothe the emperor!