



COVID-19 in the United States of America: The Military's Role in the Response

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The world is confronting an unprecedented challenge with the ongoing spread of the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). Daily infected and death numbers increase at a frightening rate. Although diseases caused by the outbreak of a virus are not new, the level of preoccupation and response to COVID-19 is unlike any we have seen before. The effects to the private and public sector of our society are substantial. Most country's health care systems risk being overwhelmed because of COVID-19 patients, leaving no room for future infected patients or those needing care for other infirmities. The economy suffers as investors are scared off by uncertainty and the majority of private and public businesses have shuttered. The responsibility to minimize current effects and also future effects to our economy and society is found at various levels: individual, family, neighbor, business, local government, and federal government. As in most countries, the United States military is another level of society which plays a role in responding to COVID-19.

The United States military's role in response to COVID-19 is better understood by a Brazilian after a brief study of the difference between the domestic use of militaries in Brazil and the United States. In Brazil, the primary mission of the military is not to fulfill expeditionary missions, but to defend the territory from within its own borders. When necessary and after meeting a series of conditions, the Brazilian military also conducts domestic Guarantee of Law and Order (GLO) missions. The United States federal military is prohibited from participating in GLO-type missions such as the federal intervention of security conducted by the Brazilian military in the state of Rio de Janeiro in 2018. If a similar situation were to occur in the United States, in which a state requested federal assistance due to a security breakdown, the federal military would not be allowed to respond. The Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 does not allow the federal government to utilize the federal military for most domestic purposes within the United States. The federal military, known as the active military, focuses instead on expeditionary missions. However, the National Guard acts as state-level military and can conduct domestic missions. Although the National Guard typically performs missions more in the area of natural disaster relief, they could contribute to security missions such as the Brazilian military recently did in Rio de Janeiro.

The National Guard is 450,000 strong and serves as a reserve military component of the federal government. When not under federal jurisdiction, they are under the control of state governors. Command of

all National Guard units ultimately comes from the governor of that state, not from active military leaders. As of 02 April 2020, nearly 18,500 National Guard members were deployed throughout the US in the fight against COVID-19, in which they are primarily providing medical and logistic support.¹ Federal funding has been approved for use by the National Guard in eleven states, two territories, and the District of Columbia, while 26 others are currently in the process of receiving approval. The National Guard receives money from the federal government, but continues under the purview of the state governor.

There are dozens of missions in which the military are supporting the fight against COVID-19 in the United States. In many states, Guardsmen have employed manned field hospitals which primarily do not treat coronavirus patients, but other patients, allowing more space in civilian hospitals. Navy hospital ships are anchored in New York (USNS Comfort) and Los Angeles (USNS Mercy) with 1,000 beds each. The United States Army Corps of Engineers is building medical facilities and conducting other civil engineering projects. Other missions include supporting border operations, transporting and delivering medical supplies, setting up and running food banks, providing and delivering corona virus sample collections, and supporting symptom screenings at testing facilities and transportation terminals.²

While fulfilling its role in the fight against the spread of COVID-19, the military attempts to minimize infections in its own ranks. Operational active units are attempting to maintain readiness while abiding by measures to limit the spread of the virus. The separate branches of the military and individual unit commanders carry out procedures such as restricting groupings to small numbers, prohibiting physical fitness training in groups, disallowing formations, and the use of teleworking (working from home through the use of email, phone, videoconference etc.) whenever possible. Leaders have modified or cancelled most courses and schools. For example, in the Army, the United States Military Academy at West Point and the Command and General Staff College suspended in-person classes and students conduct their classes online. A Department of Defense policy cancelled moves and travel not considered essential until at least the end of May. The military also cancelled exercises to include Defender Europe 20, which would have deployed over 20,000 military members from the United States to Europe, the most in over 25 years.

¹<https://twitter.com/USNationalGuard/status/1245732835463434242>

²<https://www.nationalguard.mil/Portals/31/Features/2020/COVID-19/News%20Media%20Press%20Release%20-%20COVID19%20April%202020.pdf>



For the health of our global future, the universal hope stands that the virus will come under control and our lives will normalize soon. In the meantime, the

United States military remains ready to support its citizens, whether it be through medical, engineering, or logistical support.

Rio de Janeiro - RJ, May 20, 2020.

How to cite this document:

ISAKSON, James Harold. COVID-19 in the United States of America: The Military's Role in the Response. **Observatório Militar da Praia Vermelha**. Rio de Janeiro: ECEME. 2020.