

Defense Report

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Should Military Retirees be Excluded from Federal Civil Service?

President Carter recently addressed several thousand Department of Defense military and civilian employees at the Pentagon. In response to a question from a civilian employee about military retirees working as federal civil servants the President called the practice, ". . . an excessive benefit of the military retirement system." The civilians in the audience combined to give the President his strongest applause when he finished that comment.

Apparently neither the President nor the civilian employees have a complete grasp of the situation. The President appears to be in error when he calls this a failure of the military retirement system. In fact two totally separate bodies of law are involved. A former military person is free to accept any kind of employment not barred by the conflict-of-interest laws.

With the exception of retired regular officers, who must surrender a major part of their retired pay when they accept federal employment, there are no bars against the military retirees competing for and accepting any civil service job for which they are qualified.

Unquestionably the reaction of the civilian employees at the Pentagon was colored by the fact that the heaviest concentration of military retirees on the civilian payroll is found in the Washington area. A broader look at the overall picture of retirees working for Civil Service might clear up some of their apprehensions. The Civil Service Commission says, for example, that just five percent of all civil servants are retired military personnel and 66 percent of these are not at the top management levels but occupy jobs paying between \$10,000 and \$18,000 annually. A third of them are "blue collar" workers.

And contrary to the stereotype of military retirees generally found among career civil servants only 27,682 of the total 141,817 retirees on the civil service rolls are ex-officers. Also contrary to the stereotype, there are only 2,468 former colonels and Navy captains and 177 flag rank officers in the overall total.

President Carter, the great majority of career federal civil servants and the general public should know that former military personnel find jobs in government because they are qualified for them, not because of any failing in the retirement system or because of any conspiracy to deprive civilians of jobs. The physical demands of a military career make it impossible for most to serve until ready to completely retire. If military men and women must retire while still relatively young what better beneficiary is there for their training and experience than the federal government that trained them?