
Defense Report

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Military Retirement—Congressman Aspin Blunts His Lance Again

Late in the 94th Congress, with no time left to take any action, Representative Les Aspin (D-Wis.) introduced a package of bills to revamp the military non-disability retirement system. Mr. Aspin had spent a great deal of time preparing those bills and they contained some recommendations that many hard-nosed military careerists grudgingly admitted had merit.

More recently, in the midst of debate over the Fiscal Year 1978 Defense Authorization Bill, Mr. Aspin offered an amendment to put all personnel joining the military after the passage of the bill under the current Congressional Retirement System. As far as can be seen the amendment had just two similarities with Aspin's other bills—it made military retirement contributory and ended the practice of retiring after 20 years with a substantial annuity.

The amendment was debated long and loudly but defeated by a vote of 148 "ayes" to 247 "noes." The vote was closer than many observers expected, indicating growing Congressional sentiment in favor of some kind of change.

Of course Aspin pulled out all the stops, claiming that we are now spending more for retirement than for weapons and that, even if the Defense Department could be shut down tomorrow, the Nation would still have an indebtedness of \$200 billion to pay for earned retirement.

In response to Aspin's arguments Representative Bill Nichols (D-Ala.), whose House Armed Services Compensation Subcommittee is responsible for scrutiny in this area, wondered why the "gentleman from Wisconsin" had singled out the military retirement system when Social Security and the Railroad Retirement system are also in trouble and the Civil Service retirement plan has a large unfunded liability. Nichols successfully argued that military retirement problems should be solved in an orderly fashion, not with whiz-bang action on the House floor.

The lack of appreciation for the fundamental problems of the military retirement system was illustrated by Representative Thomas Downey (D-N.Y.) who accused "that very courageous lieutenant colonel who is in charge of personnel" of being more concerned about whether he can retire from the military then come back to "double dip" in the Federal Civil Service than he is about the defense of the Nation. Downey views the 141,000 military retirees working in civil service with considerable alarm, but forgets that the body of law that permits federal employment for military retirees is totally separate from the retirement statute. Moreover, he ignores the training and qualifications which many of these retirees bring to their Civil Service jobs.

The military non-disability retirement system needs to be modernized. But, as Representative Nichols and his thinking fellow-members of the House know, the change must come in an orderly fashion, not in a few moments of helter-skelter floor debate.