
Defense Report

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Military Retirement—Still Another Mistaken Impression

What worries career military people most about statements by Congressmen concerning the military retirement system is that those statements are so often shot through with misinformation and a fundamental lack of understanding. The most recent of these faulty statements came from Representative Thomas J. Downey (D-N.Y.) in the form of a bylined newspaper article appearing in the Baltimore (Maryland) SUN and perhaps in other papers around the country.

"... the nation does not have an ounce of defense muscle to show for its retired pay expenditures," Congressman Downey wrote. He forgets two of the basic reasons for the system—over and above providing an income for those who have made a career of serving the Nation. These reasons are (1), to provide an incentive to serve; and (2), to keep the armed forces young and vigorous enough to fight a war.

The first general retirement law—"An Act to Improve the Efficiency of the U.S. Army"—passed the U.S. Congress in 1861. The legislators who voted for it had only to look a few blocks away to see the results of a "no retirement" situation. The General-in-Chief of the Army, Winfield Scott, was 75 years old and so infirm that he had to be lifted on and off his horse. The stagnation in the ranks was so complete that privates *might* make private first class in their second or third enlistment and regimental commanders were replaced only when they died.

The reason for this stagnation was the lack of a retirement system. An old soldier had nowhere to go (enlisted men *could* go to the Soldiers' Home in Washington) and no income once they were forced out of active service.

The problem of "superannuation" was not thoroughly licked until after World War II. Indeed, at the beginning of that war, there were still many senior officers on active duty who were physically incapable of holding up under the strain of war planning, much less combat. They had to be replaced at a time when the armed services should have been at their maximum efficiency.

In the relatively short span of time since 1941 the United States has fought three major wars. The great bulk of the career soldiers who fought in World War II have retired. Many of those who fought in Korea have either retired or are getting close to it. Eventually Vietnam veterans will be reaching retirement eligibility but after that, unless there is another war, the annual cost of military retirement should stabilize.

A good case can be made to transfer the retirement item to, perhaps, the Veterans Administration if its presence in the Department of Defense Budget triggers ill-considered outbursts like those from Representative Downey. The fact remains, however, that those dollars *do* represent a contribution to national defense, past, present and future.