
Defense Report

AUSA



Military Unionization—The Government Sows the Seed But the Union Reaps the Harvest

The Senate Armed Services Committee has unanimously approved legislation that would make unionization of the US Armed Forces illegal. There was little doubt about the outcome of the brief hearings held on the bill. The entire committee, including Chairman John Stennis (D-Miss.), had expressed opposition to the notion before the proceedings ever started.

The hearings did provide an excellent forum, though, for the exposition of servicemen's justifiable complaints. One of the most telling pieces of testimony came from Vice Admiral James D. Watkins, the Chief of Naval Personnel, who ticked off a series of alterations to the military compensation system made since 1972 which resulted in a perception of change by service personnel.

According to the admiral's toting-up, the past five years have seen 17 positive changes in the broad pattern of military compensation (including veteran's benefits), five of which involved a favorable monetary incentive. During the same time, however, there were 21 actions resulting in diminished benefits—11 of which impacted unfavorably on income. The list also showed another 15 actions being considered by various executive agencies or by Congress which would be perceived negatively. Ten of the 15 would involve a loss of income.

The balance works out to 36 negative actions taken or proposed against 17 positive ones. As far as monetary impact is concerned there were just five income-increasing actions but there were 21 actions either taken or proposed which would reduce income. But in spite of these real concerns there has been little pressure for unionization within the military ranks that look to the President and Congress for needed help.

It is true that many of the items that make up Admiral Watkins' tally were small in scope and in value but, at the same time, many were of major significance. Shrinking medical care for dependents, conversion of education benefits from the GI Bill of Rights to a contributory plan which takes money from the pocket of the service person and constant attacks on support of the commissary system in Congress and by executive agencies representing the Commander-in-Chief are three of the most galling.

Regardless of the fate of the anti-union bill, service personnel will still look to the President and to Congress for the kind of informed loyalty and support that no union could ever provide. Anything short of that would be a breach of constitutional duty and an evasion of traditional loyalties.