
Defense Report

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The Bureaucracy Invents a Problem— How to Pay Commissary Baggers

The Federal bureaucracy has been likened to many things—an octopus, an amorphous mass of bodies going in an infinite number of directions or, more gently, an over-protective mother attempting to clutch every member of her vast brood to her bosom. You may make your own metaphoric conclusion in the case of the Civil Service Commission which is seeking to protect the people who bag groceries in military commissaries by cutting their income in half.

The baggers, you see, have been working in the commissaries for years, at no expense to the taxpayers because they get only tips from the commissary patrons. "That's illegal!" said the Civil Service Commission. "They should be hired by the stores and paid the Federally established minimum wage of \$2.30 an hour (with back pay to 1974, too)." Now the baggers in the commissaries (where checkout lines are usually long and patrons tip well for help in bagging their purchases) are making a lot more than \$2.30 an hour already and have no desire to be brought under the umbrella of Civil Service employment, complete with deductions for taxes, retirement, etc.

And if the baggers are added to the government payroll the money to pay them must be found. It might come from higher appropriated subsidies for commissary operations (thus increasing the stores' vulnerability to criticism) or by raising the surcharge paid by commissary patrons (an increase of 2 percent has been suggested which would result in raising the weekly shopping bill by more than the amount now being tipped).

Congressman Les Aspin (D-Wis.) is constantly searching out what he considers federal fiscal lunacy and, by seizing upon this issue, has put himself in an unusual position of popularity with military people. Aspin has introduced legislation that would clearly set the baggers outside the law compelling payment of the minimum wage with all the related complications. The legislation has been referred to the House Labor Committee and, in the meantime, the Civil Service Commission is taking another look at its original ruling. If it does not reverse itself the Labor Committee will move ahead with Aspin's bill.

The Civil Service Commission is undoubtedly convinced it acted in the best interest of the commissary baggers. We wonder, though, if the commission bothered to ask any of the baggers what they wanted to be done for them. What the commission *has* done is to take a non-issue and turn it into another bit of evidence that the value of the commissary system to military people is gradually being eroded—and further confirmation that the federal bureaucracy creates at least as many problems as it solves.