
Defense Report

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Military Benefits—The Leaders Show What They Can Do

The Joint Chiefs of Staff have given us a good example of the kind of leadership that can go a long way to preserve the benefits that make the hazards and personal sacrifices of a military career worth considering.

One of the benefits that means most to military careerists, both while they are on active duty and after they have retired, is the availability of commissary stores where they can buy food at substantial savings. For the past several years there have been a variety of attacks on the stores, most frequently threatening to cut off appropriated fund support to store operation. This would drastically shrink the savings and probably reduce usage to the point at which the stores could not continue to operate. Congressional action last year deleted a Ford Administration proposal for a phased cutoff of this subsidy but White House budgeteers were prepared to try again in the budget for Fiscal Year 1978.

When the Joint Chiefs got wind of the renewed effort they wrote a memorandum to former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asking him to express their concern both to the budgeteers and to President Ford. The memorandum pointed out that the continuous efforts to undercut the commissary system are perceived by military personnel as a symbol of continued diminution of their benefits and compensation. The apparent lack of concern on the part of their leaders, the Chiefs said, gives many military personnel cause to consider the worth of their services.

"There is a growing apprehension . . ." the Chiefs said, "that the fundamental character of a service career . . . is changing."

While President Ford's proposed budget for FY 78 contained a number of cuts in military programs, including sharp decreases in money requested for operations and maintenance, the Chiefs called the renewed effort to save money on commissary operations, " . . . the most important adverse decision in the budget."

Secretary Rumsfeld passed the memo to the White House and the President acceded to the advice of his senior military staff. The phase-out of commissary support was deleted from the proposed budget.

The military chiefs should be the ombudsmen for the men and women who serve with them. The Joint Chiefs played a proper role in interceding on the commissary matter. Their action should provide a bright ray of hope to military professionals who have begun wondering if they chose the right career.