
Defense Report

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New Recommendations on Military Compensation—What They Really Mean

On June 27, 1977 President Carter announced the formation of the President's Commission on Military Compensation. At that time the President defined the commission's goals and gave it until March 15, 1978 to achieve them. Its charter was complex but some of the major areas it was asked to make recommendations on were: The form of military compensation best suited to the needs of the nation in peace and war; the purpose of the military retirement system and the effectiveness of the present system, and; whether the unique character of military service should be reflected in the overall compensation system.

The commissioners and their staff worked hard during the relatively brief time they had to address this very complex subject. They went out into the field to talk to service personnel and held an extensive series of public meetings. Their report is now in the hands of the President. It contains many recommendations, some of which show constructive forward thinking. Others maintain the status quo, while still others seem to miss the mark.

By recommending that the present system of base pay plus allowances be retained the commission recognized the essential nature of military service and the need for those who serve to have a sense of affinity with the organization. The commission's commitment to equity came through in their recommendations for travel and moving expenses for all grades of military people and in their support for a variable housing allowance for those who are assigned to serve in high cost areas. Their recommendations on the future form of the retirement system are another matter.

The commission apparently viewed the present military retirement system as an old-age pension program that begins paying-off too early. Few people will argue that what we have now is perfect. It needs many changes but the commissioners seemed to lose sight of the fact that military retirement is, first and foremost, a personnel management tool. It must encourage people to choose an arduous career and then provide devices to shape the size and character of the military force by varying the length of time the individual members serve. One of its prime features should be simplicity. Few people in Congress and not many military people thoroughly understand the philosophy behind the present system. Even fewer will comprehend the system recommended by the commission.

Congratulations are due the members of the commission for substantial progress in some of the tangled thickets of military compensation, but their retirement proposal is a disappointment. Its good points will be lost in complexity. The weaker points will fuel resistance to needed change.