
Defense Report

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The President's Ceiling on Military Pay Raises—An Example the Rest of the Nation Won't Buy

The Carter Administration has announced its intention to put an arbitrary ceiling of 5.5 percent on the cost of living adjustment to military pay scheduled to go into effect on October 1. This restraint, which also impacts on federal civilian employees, is calculated to be an example to the rest of the Nation of an effort to slow down spiralling inflation. As salaries swell the cost to produce everything we consume rises on a parallel track.

Unfortunately, this ceiling is planned for a year in which inflation will exceed 10 percent, thus leaving military pay at least 4.5 percent behind the cost of living. This might be a tolerable situation if military men and women were being asked to pay a one-time penalty in the interest of convincing everyone else of the need to make a sacrifice for the common good. But this is not the first time military pay has been constrained. The level of military pay fell behind comparable civilian salaries in 1972 and a succession of pay caps and other manipulations since then have made the gap much wider. Each time a president has imposed a limit on federal pay raises it has been for the same overt reason—an example of restraint to everyone else—but nobody else has paid the slightest bit of attention. Civilian sector pay has continued on its unrestrained upward path, driving inflation before it.

This latest manipulation comes at a time when Congress is close to final action on legislation to forbid unionization of the military. Passage seems assured because the Congress, and the military people themselves, are convinced that to unionize our military establishment would, over the long run, weaken it immeasurably. All agree that the President, as Commander-in-Chief, and those appointed by him to run the armed forces should be responsible to see that Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines are fairly treated. The continued depression of military pay does not meet those expectations.

It may well be that forced restraint of pay adjustments is a good first step toward controlling inflation and making our dollars buy more in markets at home and abroad. If this is so, then the President should demonstrate the strength of his leadership by insisting that the entire nation, not just a tiny fraction of it, bear the burden of restraint.

Military people devote themselves to a career that calls for all sorts of sacrifices, including the possibility of the ultimate sacrifice of their lives. These sacrifices "go with the territory" and are accepted as such. They would even accept the additional sacrifice the President proposes—If there were any hope that it would make a real contribution to the economic health of the Nation.