
Defense Report

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Playing Political Games With Soldiers' Paychecks—It Doesn't Build Confidence

Soldiering can be a tough life, filled with hazards to life and limb and beset by frequent inconveniences to the soldier and his or her family. But one of the things the United States Army has been notable for is its ability to pay its troops on time, no matter what the circumstances may be. Even in combat the paymaster is on schedule, the family allotments arrive promptly in the bank and the soldier is relieved of the major worry about a reliable income for spouse and children. The Army is proud of this tradition of punctuality and, to the soldier, it has become a hallmark of service in this best of armies.

This is not to say there have never been problems. During the 1930's the depression-ridden Army had many of its people on half pay for a time and there was at least one instance in which it could not meet a monthly payroll—even at reduced rates. But the problem then was not a break down in the system. The Army simply did not have the money to pay its people.

In mid-October, 1978 it happened again, but no depression was involved. This time, in fact, the payroll should have been part of the biggest military spending budget in the history of the nation, driven to this new height by the need to improve defense readiness and by the surge of unrestrained inflation. The whole Defense Department ran out of money because Congress, in acrid disagreement over two secondary issues, ran past the statutory September 30 deadline for completing appropriations for the new fiscal year beginning the next day. On October 1 none of the military services had the money to meet mid-month payrolls. The prospect for young service members was particularly grim as they faced landlords and installment loan payments with little or no cash reserves. Some military-oriented banks made deposits out of their own funds to cover accounts awaiting military allotment checks.

Of course the story has a satisfactory, if not happy ending as the House and Senate relaxed their obstinacy long enough to pass a defense appropriations bill on October 12 which was signed into law by the President the next day. Detailed planning by the military departments made it possible to get money into the hands of the troops almost on schedule.

But the twelve days that the outcome swung in balance gave those troops time to think about Congressional pledges of concern for their welfare and to wonder about their sincerity. If something as basic as their hard-earned pay could be put in jeopardy by a peripheral argument, they wondered, could they really depend on the Congress that is constitutionally charged "to raise and support an Army?"

A soldier does not need this kind of uncertainty. His faith in his leaders must be unchallengeable.