
Defense Report

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The Abandonment of 20-Year Military Retirement—The Wrong Step at the Wrong Time

As the President's Commission on Military Compensation weaves its way through the maze of problems that surround its subject and toward its scheduled March 15, 1978 reporting date it becomes clear that the most hotly contended issue it faces is the future shape of the military retirement system. Within that broad subject the issue of dropping, modifying or continuing voluntary 20-year retirement seems to be crucial.

It has already been proved that forcing all military careerists to serve longer will not save money over the long term. Fewer people may serve to retirement but those who do will get larger pensions. Shifting to a rigid system of retirement at 30 years of service or 55 years of age or some combination of age and service could do irreparable harm to the military personnel management system designed to provide the nation with the most effective fighting force possible. The answer to the problem of getting that effective fighting force with the least retirement-related expense seems to lie somewhere between the two extremes of 20-year voluntary retirement eligibility for everybody and forced service to 30 years or 55 years of age.

Many service personnel who leave the armed forces after 20 years could go on performing their duties efficiently for another ten years—perhaps even longer. These individuals would be found mostly in support jobs, some of them highly technical. It is just as true that by the time many infantrymen, tankers and other combat personnel reach the 20-year mark they have spent more than their share of time performing arduous duties under disagreeable and often hazardous conditions. They have had enough. Some can make the transition into administrative jobs, others can't. There simply aren't enough administrative or support jobs available to absorb all the combat people who have reached the 20-year plateau. Combat, in the Army and Marine Corps certainly, is a young person's job.

A recent paper by the Congressional Budget Office warned those who would change the military career pattern by eliminating 20-year retirement that this change would create an older force and inevitably alter its ability to perform its mission. Before that change is made, the report said, all concerned must be prepared to accept its ramifications.

The members of the President's Commission must remember that the retirement system's primary goal is to support an effective military personnel management system and it, in turn, must help produce an adequate national defense. This is the goal that must concern them most, not pure cost saving.