
Defense Report

AUSA



The President and Federal Pay—An Example of Negative Leadership

“The President is convinced that federal employees are overpaid and has ordered plans for an overhaul of the pay system.”

This quote from an unidentified White House functionary appeared in newspapers all over the country recently. The speaker went on to say that, in the President's opinion, many federal workers are paid more than their civilian sector occupational counterparts, particularly in the “blue collar” part of the work force. There was no explanation by the White House of how the situation got that way nor was there a description of the sources of information that brought the President to this conclusion. There were no words of comfort for any of the federal civil servants who immediately leaped to the conclusion that they face a pay cut while inflation continues to spiral upward and while three of the Nation's largest civilian unions are proclaiming their intention to ignore the President's voluntary guidelines on limiting pay increases.

The whole process reminds one of the courtroom parody in which the judge opens a trial with the command, “Bring the guilty man in!” One cannot help but wonder why, before leaping to the conclusion that the federal civilian employees are overpaid, the President did not convoke a panel of experts to examine the issue, much as he did for military benefits when he organized the President's Commission on Military Compensation. There is more to this issue that can be dealt with in a summary decision.

To be sure there are some aspects of federal pay that probably need a hard look. General Schedule pay is set by Congress on a national basis and there may be areas in the country where private sector civilian pay is depressed and the federal employees are being paid at rates exceeding that of their local occupational counterparts, contradicting the concept of “comparability.” This is unquestionably true in many blue collar occupations but the system devised for setting blue collar federal pay is the product of Congressional action and that body has been reluctant to make any adjustments.

The civil servant is an easy target, in many ways even easier than the military careerist. He has been stereotyped by generations of editorial writers and cartoonists as an individual whose sole purpose is to delay, confound and obfuscate. And yet it is frightening to think of what would happen to governmental functions if the real majority of hardworking, dedicated civil service people turned in their stamp pads and typewriters and went home. They deserve much better than this kind of cavalier treatment from the President of the United States.