
Defense Report

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Will The Military Compensation System Be Changed?—Don't Hold Your Breath While You Wait

Almost ten months ago the President's Commission on Military Compensation completed a long-awaited study and submitted its detailed report to the President. Mr. Carter, in turn, sent the report to Defense Secretary Harold Brown to be translated into implementing legislation. Interest in the military community ran high because the report dealt with many important aspects of a career in the armed forces, such as pay, allowances, medical care and the retirement system. Some of the commission's recommendations were constructive, others were disquieting. The implementing legislation was promised to reach the new Congress in January, 1979. It has not yet shown up.

It seems that the big impediment in the path of the legislation is the inability of the parties concerned to agree on what it should contain. When Service differences were accommodated in a Joint Chiefs of Staff-approved recommendation, Secretary Brown was unwilling to accept either that position or one developed by his own staff. He reportedly wrote his own position and shipped it back to the White House, where it remains in limbo.

In the meantime, at least two other studies of government retirement systems have been announced with the inference that Administration action on Secretary Brown's plan may be delayed until the other studies are complete. The situation is reminiscent of that following the April 1976 report of the Defense Manpower Commission. It was made as the Nation faced a Presidential election with Candidate Carter telling everyone who would listen that he intended to do "something" about military pay and retirement. Faced with that prospect, the Congress put the Manpower Commission report on the shelf and forgot about it. Military personnel have now been hearing facts, interpretations and rumors about various versions of the more recent recommendations for ten months and apprehension is understandably growing. No other segment of our society is so totally impotent to do anything about its compensation. Our military people are at the mercy of the President and Congress. They can only hope for equity.

Our servicemen and women need to know what they face in the way of changes to their retirement system, whether their housing allowance will be adjusted to deal with gross geographical differences in living costs and whether the Secretary of Defense will be given the authority he seeks to manipulate the application of cost-of-living pay raises. They need very much to know what the Administration intends to recommend about the future of a failing but most important benefit, medical care.

The broad question of military compensation has been studied to the point of obfuscation. It is past time for those studies to be translated into action.