
Defense Report

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Proposed Military Retirement Changes—Cost-Cutting Once Again Overrules Common Sense

Secretary of Defense Harold Brown has forwarded to President Carter the Defense Department's proposal for implementing the recommendations of the President's Commission on Military Compensation. Many of the proposals will improve the compensation system, but in at least one major area, military retirement, the plan must be viewed with considerable alarm.

The retirement plan sent to the President does not reflect the advice of the military services or the position of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Rather, it seems to be the personal product of Secretary Brown. It is interesting to note in this connection that no open release of the proposal has been made. Instead, a few Pentagon correspondents were given background briefings by a member of the Secretary's staff. Military personnel who have been waiting for months to get some official word of Defense Department reaction to the Compensation Commission's findings got the first glimpses of that reaction in brief wire service stories.

Dr. Brown makes no bones about the reason for his personal intervention. He wants to save money and he is willing to sacrifice the effectiveness of the military retirement system to do it. He seems to give little acknowledgement to the fact that the system has more than one purpose. First, it should provide an equitable retirement income for those who have served their country. Second, it must be good enough to encourage enlistments. Finally, it must help the military personnel managers fairly shape the size and age of the combat forces.

Secretary Brown has apparently joined the ranks of those who cannot see the reasons why the military system must be different from one for civilians. He ignores the fact there must be a way for the military personnel manager to equitably retire people who are still young by civilian standards but too old for the rigors of military service. He ignores as well the growing problem of civilian industry in eliminating non-productive people. Lacking this option the tendency will be to keep people on the military rolls past their usefulness. Combat efficiency will suffer and the taxpayers will not get their money's worth. And if a service member stays on duty for a full 30-year career, sacrificing his chances for a second career in the civilian sector, his full military retirement should be paid immediately, not partly delayed until age 60 as Dr. Brown proposes. Also if, as Brown proposes, earned retired pay will be reduced by the amount of Social Security to be paid at age 65, why should military people be included in Social Security at all?

We hope the President and Congress see the Brown proposal on military retirement for what it really is—nothing more than a counterproductive effort to save money.