
Defense Report

AUSA



The Orderly Management of Military Officers' Careers—A Legislative "Must."

The proposed Defense Officers' Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) has passed the House of Representatives twice in successive Congresses, the last time in 1978, and both times by overwhelming votes. For a variety of reasons the bill never progressed past subcommittee action in the Senate and it has died with the adjournment of the 94th and 95th Congresses. Now the House is not in the mood to take up the complicated proposal again until the Senate has finally acted.

The DOPMA legislation will bring about a standardization of officer career management and put every military service under the same set of rules for appointment, promotion, retention and retirement. At the present time the Army and Air Force systems are close to being the same but the Navy and the Marine Corps management schemes vary in significant ways from the other services. The Army and Air Force, for example, have both "temporary" and "regular" promotion lists while the Navy and Marines have just one.

Because of a quirk in the law that established the present number of officers each Service can have in its various grades, the Air Force (still a fledgling service when the existing law was passed) has had to ask for short-term relief from Congress on seven occasions to avoid having to force out large numbers of officers. This is one of the other anomalies DOPMA would correct.

Some of the resistance to DOPMA expressed in the Senate has been based on its continuance of the "up or out" system which requires officers to be promoted within prescribed periods of time or leave the service. Critics claim "up or out" is wasteful of talent and costly to the taxpayer. The Services respond that it is needed to retain high caliber people and to continue to offer sufficient promotion opportunities. In a given year, less than two percent of the officer corps is affected by actions derived from the "up or out" policy.

A new DOPMA bill was introduced in May, 1979 by Senator Sam Nunn (D-GA), Chairman of the Military Personnel Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee. There are signs that the subcommittee staff may recommend major changes to the bill, which is nearly identical to the one passed twice by the House. There is also a strong indication that the bill will be quickly "marked up" by the subcommittee and sent forward with little or no opportunity for rebuttal to its amendments. Years of work at the Pentagon and in Congress could be wiped out by such precipitous action. The legislation needs to be moved quickly but not that fast. If the House is forced to reject the Senate version of DOPMA because of radical, unacceptable changes, the bill will be beyond resurrection.