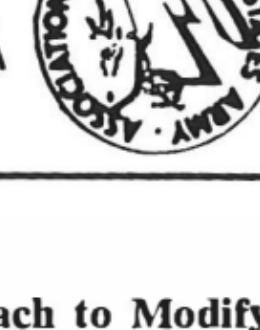


Defense Report

AUSA



The Piecemeal Approach to Modifying Military Compensation— It Won't get the Job Done

The military compensation system is complex because it wraps together a whole package of parts, each of which has its own peculiarities. The parts include base pay, allowances for housing and subsistence, special pay for hazardous duty, incentive pay to retain scarce specialists, health care, retirement and a whole galaxy of minor benefits.

The Association of the United States Army has been pleading for years for a coordinated, overall examination of the military compensation system that would eliminate a host of systemic inequities and, at the same time, make the system more effective in return for the tax dollars that support it. When President Carter appointed his Commission on Military Compensation hopes were raised for just this sort of overview. The commission in fact produced a very comprehensive report that, had it been implemented through new legislation, would have made some strides forward in limited areas. But after more than a year of internal pushing and hauling the Defense Department decided against sending an omnibus compensation reform bill to Congress. They decided instead to return to the piecemeal approach of attacking one problem at a time.

The first problem area to be isolated for action was the inflexible housing allowance that compensates some service members adequately if they happen to be stationed in less expensive areas of the Nation but severely penalizes those whose assignments are in high cost areas. The Department of Defense has drafted legislation which would authorize payment of a variable housing allowance (VHA) that could be tailored to fit localized needs. That draft bill has been gathering dust in the White House Office of Management and Budget for months, apparently because the budgeteers don't want to request additional money to pay the variable allowance. They would prefer to take money from service people being adequately reimbursed in low-cost areas and use it to pay higher allowances in the more expensive localities. They would, in effect, eliminate one part of a problem by creating a new one. This won't work.

In the meantime, thousands of military families are struggling to pay the rent, often having to sacrifice other necessities to keep a roof over their heads. The realities of this situation are well-documented. Service members and their families deserve stronger, more sympathetic support from the Commander-in-Chief and his staff. Legislation to establish a properly funded variable housing allowance should move from the White House to Capitol Hill at once. It would be even better if it were part of a comprehensive reform package, as recently recommended by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.