
Defense Report

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The Brookings Institution View of Military Service—A Misleading Distortion

The Brookings Institution, one of Washington's most active pockets of free-wheeling liberal thought, has issued a report claiming the need for youth and vigor in the armed forces of the United States is so diminished that service members should be denied retirement until they are physically or mentally "over the hill."

Like so many reports of this kind there is some truth in its conclusions but that shred of truth is eventually stretched far beyond the point of self-destruction. It is true that well trained, capable men and women leave the Army every day for any number of reasons and they must be replaced with inexperienced recruits. But Brookings maintains the cost of recruiting and subsequent training could be saved if the older people could be enticed to stay on duty by raising pay and making early retirement impossible. What the report overlooks, however, is a whole gamut of imponderables, far more complex than the amount of money in a paycheck, or the availability of 20-year retirement, that contribute to the decision to leave the service.

How would the experts at Brookings compensate for frequent transfers; for long periods of family separation; for 12-hour days and weeks with no weekends; and for the other elements, like personal peril, that are unique? Their answer would be to selectively increase the pay of the people who are needed the most, but, at the same time, to effectively eliminate the retirement benefit as an incentive to serve. ". . . military pay and not pension benefits," the Brookings report says, "should be the primary means to promote retention and enrich the experience mix of the military labor force."

That last phrase, "military labor force" is symptomatic of the increasingly dangerous tendency to treat military service just like any other job when the parallels are really very limited in number and scope. Like so many others before them the Brookings scholars fail totally to appreciate the impact of the special aspects of military service. There may be some times during garrison duty when military service comes close to civil service work but how many civil servants are expected to return to the "office" in response to an early morning phone call, roll their packs and climb on a transport bound for war?

If there is the slightest shred of doubt in the mind of anyone who might be influenced by the Brookings report, they owe themselves and the nation a closer look at the worst aspects of military service—the hardship, deprivation and peril. They would conclude, surely, that the armed services are not just another labor force, to be managed by pay manipulation.