
Defense Report

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The Arbitrary Ceiling on Military Pay Adjustments—A Legitimate Gripe

It has been said that when soldiers don't have anything else to do they sit around and gripe about the tough life they lead. The implication is that a lot of their complaints are imaginary. There certainly have been historical instances in which soldiers' imaginations or perceptions have generated unjustified gripes but there have been far more instances in which complaints have been completely valid. Soldiers' complaints about the continued depression of military pay in the face of spiraling inflation reflect one of those justifiable cases.

If President Carter has his way the 1979 annual adjustment to military and federal civil service pay to compensate for inflation will be held to 5.5 percent in the face of inflation that is expected to surpass the 10.5 percent mark. Service personnel look at the President's plan with the knowledge that white collar pay in the private sector of our economy rose 7.8 percent between March, 1978 and March, 1979. Service men and women also are aware that the planned shortfall in this year's cost-of-living adjustment will be added to those accumulating each year for several years as a succession of Presidents chose to try to save money by making sacrificial examples of the people on federal payrolls.

The President's decision on the size of federal cost-of-living adjustments is supposed to be based on the recommendations of an advisory panel which was intended to have representation from federal civil service employee unions. The union representatives gave up in disgust last year when the President ignored their recommendation. This year they didn't even bother to show up for the panel meetings. It is just as well—the President announced his decision to put on the 5.5 percent ceiling before the advisors even made their report. All this happened while thousands of soldiers in our "high paid Volunteer Army" found their income falling beneath the federal poverty level and other thousands of young military families resorted to the use of food stamps.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff, our country's senior military advisors, have told the Secretary of Defense about the morale problems being caused by shrinking military income but have been told to expend their energy elsewhere. The Secretary of the Army has become so concerned about the long-term effects of depressed pay on the Army's ability to attract and hold good people that he, too, has complained.

Service men, women and families are paying an extreme price to be an ineffective example of restraint to the rest of the nation. In the long run the nation will have to pay the added recruiting and training cost needed to replace the thousands of service people who are giving up in disgust and returning to civilian life.