
Defense Report

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Should Soldiers Have Their Families Overseas?

The United States Congress moves in mysterious ways, sometimes locked inescapably to a pattern of behavior and, at other times, completely unpredictable. The case of Congressional treatment of overseas service personnel and their families is a good illustration of the inconsistency.

Last year, after several earlier unsuccessful tries, the Defense Department convinced Congress to pay for the overseas travel of the families of young soldiers who had previously been forced to pay this expense themselves if they wanted their families with them. This year, after the program had been funded for a single year, the Senate Armed Services Committee is proposing to stop it. There will be a lot of apprehension in the Army's junior ranks as they await final congressional action.

But there is an even larger issue at stake for service people bound for overseas assignments—a proposed major cut in the number of military dependents permitted to accompany their spouses overseas at government expense. The Senate Armed Services Committee is concerned over the revelation that there are many thousands more dependents living overseas than the military services realized. The committee says it is too expensive to support these families and that their presence in a potential theater of war could be an impediment to the efficient conduct of military operations. Of course, the committee overlooked the fact that the discrepancy in the numbers reflects the fact that prior to last year's assumption of support for the younger families there was no requirement to report the presence of any family arriving in an overseas area at their own expense. The committee has mandated—subject to the approval of the full Senate and House—a 10 percent cut in overseas dependents by September 1980 and a 30 percent cut within five years, a cut of 113,400 by 1984.

Our nation's foreign policy demands large overseas troop deployments. These troops must be rotated individually or by unit and at frequent intervals if their families are left at home. But studies have shown incontrovertibly that it costs less to keep a soldier and his family overseas for longer periods than it does to leave the families home and transfer the soldiers more often.

Young men and women will not choose a career in our all-volunteer military establishment that will deny them a reasonably normal family life while, at the same time, demanding sacrifices of free movement, comfort and safety. And if economy is to be the governing factor, it argues in favor of overseas family life, not for career-long family disruption.