
Defense Report

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Sometimes the Little Things Hurt the Most—Like Making Soldiers Pay for a Place to Park

If everything goes according to schedule, Soldiers, Sailors, Marines and Airmen, along with all federal civilian employees, will begin paying for a place to park on November 1, 1979. On that date any of these people who park a car on a piece of federal property while at work will pay half the local commercial rate. A year later that will be increased to the full commercial rate. The President says this will keep people from driving their cars and thereby conserve energy. It will also, he says, eliminate an unnecessary benefit not enjoyed by the non-government working person.

In support of this decision the Administration released figures from a survey of parking fees around the nation. In downtown Washington, for example, commercial parking goes for upward of \$75 per month. It is higher on some large cities and seems to shrink on a path parallel to the downward trend in population size. The survey did not cite figures for some towns adjacent to Army installations, like Lawton, Oklahoma, Junction City, Kansas and Tacoma, Washington. There will be a great gap between what is paid by soldiers at Fort Sill, Fort Riley and Fort Lewis and that paid by soldiers working in the Pentagon.

One wonders, if making parking a painful expense is judged to be such an effective way to cut energy use, why the President did not find a way to apply the sting to people in every other form of employment? In downtown Washington, D.C., for example a sizeable number of those \$75 parking fees are paid by employers as part of a benefits package promised to their employees. That is untaxed income for non-government workers, just as it has been for civil servants and military people. If it is eliminated for one group, should it not be eliminated for all?

One wonders, too, if any thought was given to worsening the penalty military people must pay when they are ordered to serve in a high cost area like Washington? All but a very few of the military men and women who do vital work in our Nation's capital pay extremely high rents. All find the highest food prices in the country and cope with the very high energy prices. A sergeant assigned to the Pentagon receives exactly the same pay as one assigned to the Army's least expensive post. Many Washington-based enlisted men work at civilian "moonlight" jobs after duty hours. Some have working wives. Others need both kinds of extra income.

What is lacking here most of all is evenhandedness. If making automobile driving more expensive is a way out of the energy crunch it should be applied to all, by legislation if necessary, not limited to just those people the President can control by executive fiat.