
Defense Report

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Rules That Govern Military Officer Careers are a Hodge-Podge—Congress Must Correct Them

More than four years ago the Department of Defense sent a thick package of proposed legislation to Congress, hoping to eliminate all the vagaries in law and regulation that have accumulated since World War II, making service as an officer in our armed forces subject to many uncertainties and contradictions. This legislation is called the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) and, despite acknowledgements from both sides of Capitol Hill that it is badly needed, it remains suspended in conflict between the House and the Senate over just what it should do.

As things stand now, the Army has one system for handling officers' careers, the Air Force has one almost like the Army but the Navy and Marine Corps have systems at wide variance with the other services. The differences impact on every stage of a military or naval career, from initial commissioning, through the points at which officers can be considered for promotion, to eligibility for retention on duty or forced release by retirement or separation. The Air Force has a special problem derived from the fact that its grade ceilings were set in 1947 when a relatively small separate air service was established. The Air Force has grown and the ceilings have had to be temporarily adjusted every two years to avoid a forced purge of officers to roll back to the 1947 limit. DOPMA would permanently correct this flaw.

The legislation also would eliminate the distinction between regular officers and reservists on active duty as both reach the 11-year point of service, making the correct assumption that any officer who has stayed on duty that long is a careerist. Since regulars are now protected by law from reductions-in-force, reservists on active duty have borne the brunt of RIF actions, although there may have been regulars with poorer records.

The House of Representatives held extensive hearings on DOPMA beginning in 1974 and has passed it twice, each time by overwhelming margins. The Senate, in the meantime has only skimmed the surface of the legislation. The fundamental issue between the houses of Congress seems to be whether or not officers who fail promotion selection should be retained on active duty in some capacity or separated or retired. The House supports this "up or out" policy. The Senate has never put itself on the record officially but it is understood that Armed Services Committee Chairman Senator John Stennis (D-Miss.) and Personnel Subcommittee Chairman Senator Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) don't like it.

The House has done all it can do. It is now up to the Senate to take the initiative. This badly-needed legislation should be high on the Senate's list for the new 96th Congress.