
Defense Report

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The President and the All-Volunteer Force—It Seems He Just Doesn't Understand Its Problems

When a substantial number of our soldiers came into the Army by way of the draft there was always a solid base of "back home" support. Today, with an entire Army of volunteers, many people have turned their backs on the men and women in uniform, assuming that the Congress and the Commander-in-Chief are looking out for their welfare and assuring the promises of equitable compensation for volunteer military service are being kept. In the case of the Commander-in-Chief, though, it appears that the promise of a satisfying career in the service of one's country has been at least clouded by a lack of appreciation for the problems of our volunteers.

In a hand-written note to Defense Secretary Brown, which has been widely quoted in the press, the President asked that criticism from top defense officials on the subject of inadequate pay and lagging force readiness be stopped. "When I was in the Navy," the note said, "pay was not the major factor." The decision to stay in service or leave, he said, was based on other things.

In the late 1940's and early 1950's, when the President served after his graduation from Annapolis, military—or naval—service was still considered a special kind of career that had many benefits other than pay. In the intervening years, though, the benefits have been eroded, attacked and sometimes eliminated and, most recently, the assumption of the All-Volunteer posture has begun to build the "this-is-just-another-job" attitude. Perhaps most crucial of all, when the President was in the Navy we were not experiencing double-digit inflation, year after year. Because of limitations placed on military pay adjustments—the last two by President Carter—the pay of a Soldier, Sailor, Airman or Marine now lags behind the buying power of civilian pay by between 15 and 25 percent and it will get worse this year because of another planned "pay cap."

One of the benefits that former service personnel enjoyed, at its height, was a full range of medical care. All the services were still drafting doctors so there was no shortage of skilled medical practitioners. Today there is a severe shortage of military physicians and the Congress tried to remedy this situation, at least in part, by passing a law authorizing higher bonuses for doctors who stay in the service. President Carter vetoed that bill as too expensive, smashing morale in the military medical ranks and convincing the beneficiaries of the system there will never be an improvement in long waiting lines, overworked doctors and referrals to expensive civilian care.

It seems the President needs to get out among the troops he commands and to talk to them about their problems and their expectations. The conditions he recalls from service that ended 27 years ago do not exist in full measure any more. Many of our uniformed men and women serve at sub-poverty levels of compensation. Some would serve out of sheer love of country, no matter how they were paid. Both situations are wrong, even if one might be admirable. The President should know that.