
Defense Report

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Does the Congress Want a High-Quality Volunteer Army?

After taking a close look at the recent performance of Congress, the leaders of our armed forces must be very confused about what they are expected to achieve in terms of recruiting a high-quality force of men and women.

A few weeks ago the Army had to call in a lot of its political chips to avoid an arbitrary cut of 25,000 personnel spaces, proposed in the Senate to be a sign of that body's dissatisfaction with the quality of the Army's recruits. The sponsors of this punitive measure told the Army it was getting too few high school graduates and said the service should only be permitted to restore the cut as the proportion of diploma-holders was increased. The proposal was defeated on the Senate floor but not until the Army was forced to do a major selling job to prove that the cut was not the answer to getting more of the right kind of people. At this point it would seem that the Army had a clear mandate from the Congress, which bears the ultimate constitutional authority to "raise and support an army," to recruit a high-quality force. The other services must have gathered the same impression from observing the Army's predicament.

But now we have a report that indicates an apparent lack of consensus in Congress on the need to recruit those quality volunteers. While the Senate Armed Services Committee was expressing its concern over quality by proposing the Army strength cut, the House Appropriations Committee was showing its prime concern with cost-cutting by reducing the amount of money the Defense Department will have for recruiting in the next fiscal year by \$100 million. This is not exactly a chicken-feed-adjustment to the recruiting budget. It makes one wonder whether the members of the House committee are reading the same reports about recruiting problems as are the members of the Senate.

It makes one wonder, too, if Congress is truly committed to the support of a volunteer armed force as it claims to be or whether this inconsistency is simply another evidence of its intent to encourage a long-term drift toward the peacetime use of Selective Service. While a number of improvements in the military compensation system are making their way through the legislative process this year, all of them would be required by a force with a large population of draftees as well as by one peopled entirely by volunteers. The pending improvements in base pay, allowances and educational benefits are needed to reestablish equity between military compensation and that expected for careers in the civilian sector. They are not likely to start a new rush to the recruiting offices.

Congress must make up its collective mind about the way it wants to fill the ranks of our military services. Its present inability to set a recognizable course and then stick to it confuses those charged with implementing its policies. It must also baffle the young men and women of military age who need to know whether there will be long-term support for a decision to undertake a military career.