
Defense Report

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The Military Pay Raise—It Looks Big, but It Doesn't Do the Job

On 1 October, 1980, the men and women of our armed forces began to receive an 11.7-percent increase in their base pay. The last substantial raise in military pay took place in 1972 when, in the interest of equity and to support the recently established all-volunteer force, military pay was brought up to a level of comparability with that in the civilian sector. There have been other raises in the intervening years, to be sure, but they were universally lower than the accompanying rise of inflation and several times were depressed even further by Presidential decisions to "cap" the adjustments below recommended levels.

So, in terms of a percentage, the 11.7-percent raise seems to be a large one. In terms of the ground lost to accumulating inflation over the last eight years, however, it is not a big raise. In fact, it barely covers the inflation of the past year. One way to track this imbalance is to follow the course of the federal minimum wage. This level of compensation frequently applies to young people just out of school and starting a career, such as soldiering.

In 1972, when military pay was deemed "comparable" to civilian pay, the minimum wage was \$1.60 per hour. By 1980 that rate almost doubled to \$3.10 per hour. Unfortunately, the constricted adjustments to military pay did not keep pace with even the civilian minimum wage so that by 1980 an Army recruit was being paid at a rate equal to 84 percent of the minimum wage—and this computation did not consider the far greater number of hours the recruits were on duty each week. It is small wonder that many young people who considered enlistment in the volunteer force chose instead to fry hamburgers in fast food restaurants.

The 11.7-percent increase did not set that inequity straight. In fact the 11.7-percent adjustment only brought recruit pay from 84 percent of the minimum wage to 86 percent, leaving the new soldiers a full 14 percent behind their burger-frying peers.

This might not have been so bad for drafted recruits who knew they were serving only briefly and could return to civilian life afterward. It is not good for young men and women who have been sold on a career in the military as a job entailing decent compensation and implying all the support needed for a satisfying family life. Today, more than half the soldiers in our Army are married and last year over \$12 million in food stamps were redeemed in the military commissary system. There is no way to find out how many more food stamps were presented to civilian supermarket cashiers by soldiers whose income was low enough to qualify them for the program. Moving upward from 84 percent of the maximum wage to 86 percent will not change the food stamp statistics very much.

Yes, the 11.7-percent raise will be helpful. No, it is not enough. If we want well-prepared armed forces manned with well-motivated volunteers we must do better. That means a return to the comparability level of 1972.