
Defense Report

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Another Attack on the Military Commissary System — Its Customers are Getting Shell-shocked

The military commissary system in the United States was first established to provide a source of food for the families of soldiers stationed at remote forts, far from civilian suppliers. Later, during the frequent periods in which the military services had a very low priority for funds, the lower prices at the commissary stores permitted a reasonable standard of living for underpaid military families.

The commissaries have been a part of American military life for over 150 years. Their existence as a source of reasonably priced food has been a selling point used by recruiters for many years, along with the expectation of good health care for soldiers and their families and of adequate retirement benefits. These promises and the ensuing expectations have assumed even greater importance as the nature of the Army has changed from a largely draftee force to one of volunteers. The percentage of married soldiers has grown as the force has become more career-oriented. Today more than half the Army is married and some junior enlisted families qualify for food stamps.

But now the General Accounting Office, Congressional watchdog over the executive departments, has issued a report calling for an end to appropriated support of the commissary system and for closing some stores in areas where there is an abundance of commercial food stores. Without the appropriated subsidy the saving to military shoppers (now estimated by the Department of Defense at 25 percent but perceived by the customers as somewhat less) would drop to between 10 and 15 percent. The managers of the commissary system are fearful that the reduced savings will drive customers into the more convenient, better-stocked supermarkets and that the lack of business will eventually force many commissaries to close.

Soldiers—and Sailors, Airmen and Marines—see this attack on a traditional military benefit in the same light in which they observe deteriorating medical care and repeated, cost-oriented attacks on the existing retirement system. They see these actions collectively as a breach of faith on the part of elected leaders who can only give lip service to the notion of an all-volunteer armed force.

To withdraw the appropriated subsidy from the military commissaries would further diminish the declining buying power of military pay which has been "capped" below advancing inflation and lags between 10 and 25 percent behind comparable civilian compensation. It would drive more fully-trained service members out of the ranks and make it that much harder to recruit new members. To say the least, the GAO proposal would be counter-productive.