
Defense Report

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What Should Be the Size and Form of the Next Military Pay Raise?

One of the major items on the Congressional agenda for September is action on the annual adjustment to military pay. The people who will be the eventual beneficiaries of that action are hopeful that after more than six years of lagging behind the cost of living, military pay will finally regain comparability to compensation in the civilian sector. To achieve that goal Congress will have to approve one of the biggest military pay raises in history.

Our volunteer armed forces were last paid on a basis of comparability in 1972. It has all been downhill ever since. Not even the 11.7-percent raise that went into effect in October, 1980, regained comparability. About 75 percent of our military men and women fall into the "blue collar" area of employment and even after the October, 1980, raise they were still lagging 11.4-percent behind their civilian counterparts. Congress is now looking at a 14.3-percent raise to close that gap and make up for growth since that comparison was made.

Our legislators must not only decide whether that much of a raise is adequate but also must judge whether every person in uniform should get it. Over the years of our volunteer experiment, while the emphasis has been on getting new people into uniform rather than on keeping the older ones, the pay rates for the various ranks have become "compressed" so there are only insignificant differences between the levels of pay for many ranks. There is little incentive to serve long enough to be promoted and even less incentive to take on the responsibilities that go with promotion.

There is strong sentiment in Congress favoring a special allocation of this year's raise by grade, rather than giving an across-the-board increase, in the hope of achieving decompression. But outside Congress there is concern as to the propriety of giving anyone less than the full cost-of-living raise and even greater doubt that Congress should make the decision on which ranks get a bigger raise than others.

It would seem far better to first regain comparability for all ranks and then let the service secretaries decide which ranks need more money, based on problems peculiar to each service. It is to be hoped that Congress will see the wisdom of that course.