
Defense Report

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Longer Military Careers—What Must We Do to Make Them Attractive and Productive?

In a recent letter to *The Washington Post*, Rep. Les Aspin (D-Wis.) decried the fact that so many members of our armed forces voluntarily end their careers after 20 years of service and pointed with special alarm to the fact that last year 1,744 servicemen and women retired at the age of 37. Mr. Aspin called upon the President and the secretaries of the armed services to exercise their statutory authority to keep people on active service longer.

Whether he realized it or not, Rep. Aspin was pointing out two very real needs for efficient military manpower management. The first requirement is to make a military career more bearable. If we can eliminate the kinds of negative features like frequent moves and extended family separations; if we can make sure that a service member who moves in response to reassignment orders need not incur a personal debt; if we provide comparable pay and if we can assure both married and single service members a decent place to live—then we will have eliminated the largest drives toward early retirement. If a soldier does not find himself asking his wife to “hang on for just a few more years” of discomfort and deprivation, early retirement will lose much of its allure. The elimination of all these negatives is clearly within the constitutional purview of Congress.

Second, and just as important, Mr. Aspin was calling renewed attention to the need for modernizing the retirement system. The present system has evolved over the years as a result of many stop-gap actions. It is poorly understood by the Congress that oversees it and even by the military people who are its beneficiaries. It has been studied in depth by the Defense Manpower Commission during 1974–1976 and by the President’s Commission on Military Compensation in 1977–1978, but none of the maze of resulting recommendations was ever given a close look by Congress.

Needless to say, there are ways to encourage longer service and, at the same time, to equitably compensate those careerists whose service must be shortened in order to keep a healthy mix of fighters, technicians and administrators. Armed with those equitable means, the service secretaries would be better motivated to manage their personnel more in accord with the needs of the service and less out of deference to individual choice.