
Defense Report

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The President's Task Force on Military Manpower — Its Success Is Crucial

President Reagan has announced the formation of a high-level task force to study “. . . all aspects of manpower requirements and conditions in the armed forces.” The importance the commander in chief places on this task is reflected in the makeup of the group. Its chairman is the secretary of defense and its membership includes other cabinet-level officers and important staff personnel from both the White House and the Pentagon.

Undoubtedly, they face a monumental job. They need to get into questions about how the forces will obtain enough of the right kinds of manpower as the eligible pool of young people shrinks and as the economic factors that are now driving volunteers into the ranks hopefully begin to turn around. The task force must plunge headlong into a morass of problems related to our ability to retain trained people for a full career.

Although some progress has been made in improving housing allowances and in compensation for official travel expense there are still holes in the system that cost service members significant amounts of money. Pay tables have become so badly compressed by raising the rates at which we pay recruits that there is little financial incentive to assume the responsibilities of leadership.

Family medical care is spotty and dental care is largely unavailable. The turnaround time between overseas assignments is far too short for some non-commissioned officers, and families are putting growing pressure on service members to find more agreeable employment. The notion of military service being a “calling” instead of just another job has been largely obliterated.

Those who have closely observed the development of these problems are wary of the task force's ability to cope with them. Having watched a total of four years of effort on the part of the Defense Manpower Commission and the President's Commission on Military Compensation gather dust on library shelves, we can only hope that the findings of this latest group are translated quickly into action by executive directive where possible and by new law where necessary. Anything less would be another wasted effort.