
Defense Report

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The Office of Management and Budget Wins the Prize for Short Memories

Presidents come along every four or so years, bringing with them cabinet officers and directors of all kinds. When the presidents leave, the cabinet officers and directors almost always depart, too. But when the bosses change, the career bureaucrats who make all the agencies run remain entrenched in their jobs, generally espousing the same notions they have been pushing at several cycles of cabinet officers and directors.

Recently, two ideas were resurrected by the Office of Management and Budget after having been entombed several times. The first was the suggestion that military families pay a \$3 fee each time a child or wife uses a military medical facility. OMB, when the fee was first proposed, said it would do two things: discourage unnecessary family use of the medical system, and; raise \$100 million each year to pay for other activities. Quite aside from the questionable mathematics, which would require 33 million medical visits each year by about one million families, the sponsor of this notion overlooks the pledge of free medical care made to members of the volunteer force. He also ignores the very real possibility that even a \$3 fee could be a real hardship for some young military families already existing at close to the poverty level and the fact that collecting and accounting for the fees would cost more than would be collected. Military clinics would be forced to hire bookkeepers to perform a function that is totally alien to them.

The second resurgent notion suggests that appropriated subsidies for the operation of military commissaries be reduced, thereby forcing commissary customers to pay higher prices. Here again a basic promise to our service people is being ignored but this time the sum of money that could be involved is far more substantial. A military family of four could be forced to spend several hundred additional dollars each year for food, which amounts to an uncompensated reduction in spendable income. This would come at a time when Congress and the Reagan Administration say they are concerned about how far service pay has fallen behind that in the civilian sector.

These two ideas need to be disowned quickly and permanently, before they have the expected negative impact on morale and retention. Perhaps even more important, their sponsors should be directed to dispatch them, once and for all, to the trash heap.