
Defense Report

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At Last — Military Pay Structure Recognizes the Need to Retain Professionals

When the United States shifted from the use of the draft to man the Army and to provide an incentive to join the other services it was decided that the newly enlisted soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines should be paid at something more than the bare subsistence rates in effect for recruits at that time. The lower grades of service people received one-time, large increases in pay while their more experienced noncommissioned officer leaders saw only cost-of-living raises. As a result, the compensation gap between junior and senior narrowed to the point at which there was barely a \$100 difference between the base pay of a private first class and that of a sergeant. This was not much of an incentive to do the hard work and accept the responsibility that goes with entry into the leadership ranks.

Needless to say, this was a disincentive to stay in uniform and, when it was added to the long hours, family separations and frequent overseas tours being encountered in all the services, was a force toward a too-frequent decision to jump to the civilian world. All the services have been experiencing a hemorrhage of trained senior NCOs and technicians, most often among those whose military duties had ready civilian application.

The Defense Department and Congress have both recognized this problem but have differed on the way it should be solved. Now, however, with the help of some suggestions from the Secretary of Defense, Congress has passed a new military pay bill and the President has signed it into law. The agreed solution gives junior enlisted people a raise ranging from ten percent to 13 percent to get them back to a level of comparability with civilian-sector pay. It then raises the pay of careerists from between 16.5 and 17 percent, thereby creating a truly significant incentive to strive for rank and responsibility.

Although this legislation was formulated with little fanfare, the ease with which the two houses of Congress came to agreement is the best evidence of the concern our lawmakers felt for the most valuable asset our national defense establishment possesses—its devoted career people. We now must make sure that compensation for valued military service never again falls below comparability with pay in the civilian sector.