
Defense Report

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Congress Accuses the Defense Department of Bad Management—Its Own Actions Are a Major Cause

Hardly a week goes by without an accusation from a member of Congress, one of its committees or its watchdog agency, the General Accounting Office, that the Defense Department is not managing itself properly. Sometimes the accusations are justified, but very often Congress would do well to examine its own role in a particular program to see if it is somehow culpable.

There is one congressional tendency that causes problems and misunderstandings far beyond its most obvious impact. The appropriations committees frequently attempt to make law by setting dollar ceilings far below the intent of the responsible armed services committees, very often without bothering to hold hearings to determine the effect of the ceilings. In doing so they place the Defense Department in the awkward position of being told to execute a program by one committee and being denied funds to do so by a second committee. It is small wonder that Defense Department managers are confused.

Recent actions by the House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee, again without hearings, are typical. While the Armed Services Committee has expressed its deep concern over the services' ability to recruit and retain enough good people in their ranks and have been looking for ways to enhance recruiting and retention, the appropriations subcommittee voted to make major reductions in recruiting funds and to sharply reduce the money available for reenlistment bonuses. Needless to say, the personnel managers at the Pentagon were nonplussed.

Also without holding any hearings, the subcommittee recommended arbitrary cuts in the level of retired pay for people completing military service after this year—a clear violation of enlistment contracts signed 20 or more years ago—and voted to decrease support for military commissaries. This last action would raise the cost of living for all military families. Once again, individual soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines are put in the position of having to doubt the validity of any long-term pledges made at the time of their enlistment. Their leaders must also wonder how many of their people will give up in disgust at the end of their current enlistment and why one committee of Congress is running headlong into the path of another.