
Defense Report

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The Slide Starts Again — Military Pay Will Lag Behind Comparability

There is no logical reason why the people who choose to make a career of military service to the Nation should be paid less than their civilian counterparts who, for the most part, don't have to put up with the same dangers and inconveniences. When military and civilian pay match this coincidence is called "comparability." It was achieved briefly in 1972 when it became apparent that a volunteer armed force had to be at least as attractive as employment in the civilian sector, but it slid backwards as politicians who gave lip service to volunteerism decided it was too expensive. Comparability was regained in 1981, but only after several years of campaigning by groups representing all the members of the armed forces and by a relative handful of Senators and Congressmen who recognized the inequity.

Now in the midst of a severe economic downturn, with the services having little difficulty in recruiting high caliber volunteers, it appears that the principle of comparability is about to be submerged once again. Pledges made at the time the 1981 pay adjustment went into effect, vowing to keep the links between military and civilian compensation forever unbroken, have been forgotten in the drive to find ways to trim the federal budget. As this was being written it appeared that the cost-of-living adjustment to military pay scheduled to go into effect on October 1 will be approximately half the size of the actual inflation-driven growth in the consumer price index. The great bulk of military jobs are comparable to the blue collar trades in which union contracts dictate annual adjustments that at least match the spiral of the cost of living.

We cannot help but wonder how Congress would be approaching the October 1 pay adjustment if the recruiting and retention statistics were not so favorable. The last few weeks have brought hopeful signs of an economic turnaround that could bring the current recruiting euphoria to an end. If that happens the members of Congress who propose a four percent pay adjustment rather than the eight percent requested by the Defense Department may face a sudden down turn in recruiting statistics and have to face the shortsightedness of their pay-limiting action.

Congress has acknowledged that military pay should be based on equity and comparability with the civilian sector. Each time they violate that principle the attractiveness of a career in our armed forces is diminished.