
Defense Report

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A New Review of Military Compensation—Its Findings Should Be Heeded

By law, the Department of Defense is required to take a close look at the military compensation system every four years. The “quadrennial reviews” are conducted by a handpicked group of experts who look into important aspects of the total package that comprises a service member’s pay, both in terms of dollars received and in the form of current and future benefits. The purpose of the studies is to insure that the compensation system is achieving its intended results by making military service attractive in both the short and long terms. The results of the quadrennial reviews—there have been four earlier ones—go to Congress and the Administration with recommendations for such action as appears necessary.

Unfortunately, the voluminous recommendations of the review panel are almost never translated into administrative adjustments or legislative proposals. They gather dust on Congressional committee bookshelves, primarily because a busy Congress has so little time for in-depth examination of complicated issues. The finely detailed report of the Defense Manpower Commission, issued in 1976, and the more recent report of President Jimmy Carter’s Commission on Military Compensation, both of which made many constructive recommendations, have been ignored like the previous quadrennial reviews.

This inaction is a disservice to the nation and to the men and women who serve in its armed forces. There are many aspects of the military compensation system which need to be modified, if not totally restructured, to assure efficient use of military pay dollars and to insure equity for the participants in the system. Many changes should be made to the now totally inequitable military retirement system, for example, and the method for repaying the out-of-pocket expenses for making official moves leaves much to be desired.

It would be much better if the Defense Department and Congress, working in concert, would use the recommendations of an in-depth study like a quadrennial review, as the basis for corrective action rather than striking out superficially. It has seldom been done before. This would be a good time to start.