
Defense Report

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The Proposed Freeze on Military Pay —It Will Bear the Wrong Kind of Dividends

When the United States abandoned the peacetime use of selective service and committed itself to using volunteers to fill the ranks of the armed forces, a substantial adjustment was made to military pay to bring it closer to comparable civilian pay. It did not take long, however, for Congress and the various administrations to realize that keeping the ranks filled with volunteers was very expensive. Military pay was permitted to slide further and further behind comparability with the civilian sector until the damage became so apparent—in the form of losses of trained, experienced people—that it took a pay adjustment of more than 14 percent in 1981 to regain comparability.

Last year the slide began again, with military pay capped by Congress—with the concurrence of the Administration—at four percent, or half the amount indicated by the increase in the cost of living. For the upcoming fiscal year 1984, the Administration is proposing to freeze military pay at the current level instead of asking for a raise that would keep pace with the current year's private-sector wage growth and making up for the erosion caused by last year's cap, as the Defense Department promised several months ago. According to Administration spokesmen, the members of the military services are expected to make this "sacrifice" as their contribution to the enormous task of reducing deficit spending by the federal government.

Quite aside from the inroads this proposal would make on the purchasing power of service personnel, it would be counterproductive in at least two other ways. First, it would tend to polarize the attitudes of those service members facing the choice between reenlisting and leaving the service. Second, it would be evidence to those considering enlistment that military service is a chancy proposition in more ways than the everyday dangers that might be involved.

A staff member of a congressional committee which deals with military matters has called the pay freeze "a dumb idea." All things considered, that remark may be too kind.