
Defense Report

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Skimping on Military Pay—It Makes Second-Class Citizens of Our Men and Women in Uniform

If we have learned nothing else from our decade and a half experience with the all volunteer armed forces, we should know by now that when military pay does not keep up with the cost of living, good people turn in their uniforms. That same hard experience has shown that the people who are first to leave the services are the ones we found hardest to recruit.

Recently, officials of the Department of Defense informed Congress that the military could expect to lose 20,000 to 30,000 career people by 1989 if service pay this year is again capped at the same reduced percentages as it has been for the last several years.

This backward slide from "comparability"—that rare coincidence where military and civilian pay are considered to be roughly equal—began shortly after the 1981 pay adjustment which was accompanied by a congressional pledge to keep forever unbroken the links between civilian and military compensation.

The legislators, apparently with White House concurrence, have evidently cast aside their good intentions in the push to reduce the massive federal budget deficits. Because military pay increases have been capped at reduced percentages since 1981, the purchasing power of soldiers' pay has again sunk below the level of civilian blue collar workers.

For fiscal 1985, the President requested a 5.5 percent increase in service pay to make up in part for earlier cuts. The Senate cut this back to four percent and the House of Representatives lowered it further to only 3.5 percent. A Joint Conference Committee will eventually agree on some figure which will most certainly be no more than the Senate proposal and probably will be delayed some months beyond the normal adjustment date of 1 October. This will, of course, put our service people even further behind the comparability curve.

The executive and legislative branches of our government, both having previously acknowledged that military pay should be based on equity and comparability, have once again violated that principle and are jointly responsible for helping to diminish the attractiveness of a career in our armed forces.