
Defense Report

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Comparing Retirement Programs— The Duty Makes the Difference

A frequently voiced criticism of military retirement is that it is much more generous than civilian pension plans. Direct comparisons with private sector wage and benefit plans are sometimes useful mechanisms for gauging the general adequacy of military pay, but efforts to model service compensation after civilian systems have never been successful. In reality, the armed forces retirement system *is* unlike any other. That is as it should be, since duty in the uniformed services is totally incomparable with civilian employment.

Nowhere in the private sector are young men and women who first join an organization required to sign an unlimited liability contract such as that entered upon by service members. Without recourse, armed forces personnel can be legally required to fight anywhere in the world and may be severely punished if they disobey orders to do so. They may be used when and as long as the national authorities believe appropriate, with no regard for their personal preferences or their occupational specialties.

As a matter of course, service members forfeit a considerable degree of personal freedom and undergo frequent family disruptions and inconveniences while being subject to high risk. Long hours of grueling labor without overtime pay are regular features of military duty as are duties at undesirable or remote locations, living in housing which does not meet basic American standards and being on call all the time for an entire career.

National authorities retain complete and one-way control over the military force with the freedom to use it in any way necessary in the national interest. That includes the right to individually "fire" members, despite fully satisfactory performance, in mid-career, for any momentary convenience to the government. Service members may be forced to retire without regard to personal preferences or family circumstances, can be recalled whenever the need arises, and are subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice in perpetuity.

Congress needs to carefully consider these rigid conditions of service before attempting to reform the retirement part of military compensation. It must compare duties before comparing pay.