
Defense Report

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Putting The Military Pay Raise in Limbo Puts a Lot of Strain on Service People

The 2.1 million men and women who wear the uniform of the Armed Forces of the United States find themselves in the middle of political warfare being raged over the 1989 defense authorization bill. At stake for service people is a 4.1 percent pay raise, a seven percent increase in their housing allowance and a 4.1 percent boost for food allowances. On Capitol Hill, both Republicans and Democrats are blaming each other for playing politics with the defense spending bill.

Congress sent the President a \$229.5 million authorization bill which contained the military pay increases and a four percent raise for federal civilian workers. President Reagan vetoed that bill because of severe cuts to the Strategic Defense Initiative and because he felt Congress was infringing upon his arms control responsibilities.

Now legislators from both sides seem determined to make the military pay raise a casualty of this election-year fracas. If this happens, servicemen who are already drawing some 11 percent less money than their civilian counterparts, will see the purchasing power of their pay drop even further behind the inflation curve.

Fifteen years ago, when the United States shifted to all-volunteer armed forces, the people of this country and their elected leaders came to the realization that they would need to pay the price in dollars that it would take to attract and retain enough of the good people our military services required. That message was again written large when the Ford and Carter Administrations imposed "caps" on inflation-related pay adjustments, causing many middle grade service people to "vote with their feet." The results were a severe shortage of military pilots, ships that couldn't leave port and an Army branded by its Chief of Staff as "hollow."

Almost to a person, political office holders and would-be office holders profess loudly that they are in favor of a credible defense establishment. What they must now decide is whether they are willing to pay the price of filling the ranks of that establishment with fairly-compensated volunteers. Until that decision is made and executed there will be a lot of servicemen and women who will opt to turn in their uniforms and find another game that is played under more equitable rules.