
Defense Report

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The Erosion of Military Pay—It's Not The Way to Keep Good People

Q. When does a military pay raise result in smaller checks for people in uniform?

A. When Congress halves the President's recommended raise, requires a larger social security deduction and imposes a freeze on military housing allowances.

That's just what happened to thousands of servicemen and women when Congress reduced the requested four percent pay hike to a two percent increase, effective last January 1st. At the same time, all service members were hit with a one percent increase in their social security payroll taxes. Then the Defense Department was forced to realign military housing allowance rates which resulted in smaller paychecks for some 135,000 military families. Needless to say, such moves do not sit well with military personnel and have the potential to place in jeopardy all the recent gains made in attracting and retaining the high quality people now serving in our Armed Forces.

Defense Secretary Frank C. Carlucci has publicly vowed to make his number one priority the 4.3 percent pay raise for military personnel proposed in the 1989 Defense Budget. Already there is ample indication that he will not have an easy time of it as House and Senate members begin to see the money requested for a military pay raise as a possible bill payer for other programs.

At his very first appearance on Capitol Hill to present the new budget, Secretary Carlucci was questioned at length concerning the chances of reducing the requested increase in order to fund a variety of other programs. To his great credit, Mr. Carlucci has held firm in his belief that the requested amount is the minimum necessary to slow the growing gap between military and private sector wages. Consecutive pay caps over the past six years have widened that gap to 11 percent, where it was in the late 1970s when we witnessed one of the greatest "hemorrhages of talent" in the history of our Armed Forces.

Is it asking too much for Members of Congress to remember back only ten years to the days of the "hollow Army" when our military was weakened by low quality recruits and an exodus of experienced people? That in itself should be enough to convince Congress that the standard of living for American soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines should not be diminished to pay for pork.