
Defense Report

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Congress Sees the Need to Raise Military Pay, But Doesn't Want to Fund It

In the 1989 military budget, Defense Secretary Frank C. Carlucci put forth two changes to military compensation that are both necessary and logical. He made it abundantly clear that his top priority is a 4.3 percent pay raise for people in uniform—an increase he terms crucial to the services' need to attract and retain the high quality people required to meet our national security objectives.

As a result of six consecutive pay caps, military pay is now 11 percent behind private sector pay. The raise requested by Mr. Carlucci will not make up any of the 11 percent pay gap; it simply prevents it from getting larger.

The new budget also includes a 3.4 percent increase in the supplemental housing allowance paid to offset exceptionally severe living expenses of military personnel who are stationed at certain high-cost locales. Continued Congressional freezes on these variable housing allowances are resulting in a reduction in the standard of living for large numbers of people in uniform. Right now military housing allowance rates overall are less than in 1986, despite an 8.5 percent increase in housing costs over that period.

No sooner did these two military compensation proposals land on Capitol Hill than various lawmakers offered adjustments to one or the other. The most frequently aired suggestion calls for cutting the pay raise a few percentage points in order to fund the housing allowances. That scheme only helps those who draw the housing allowance. In effect, it forces people in the armed forces to fund their own allowances.

Secretary Carlucci has vowed to maintain the quality of our armed forces by campaigning hard against the further erosion of military compensation and the quality of life of our soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines. He has already come down strong on these issues when appearing before Congressional budget hearings and in his Pentagon press conferences. Further, he has directed the leadership of the military departments to muster the full power of their offices behind the pay issues.

There is a limit to how a far military compensation can be allowed to erode relative to private sector pay before it has a serious detrimental effect on morale, and ultimately on recruiting and retention. The Defense Secretary will need all the help he can get in his fight to prevent that from happening.