
Defense Report

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Here We Go Again—Military Lags Behind Comparability

When the Secretary of Defense publicly states that there isn't much that can be done about the wide disparity between military and civilian compensation, it doesn't do much for the morale and well-being of the many bright young men and women who have volunteered to serve in uniform.

There is no logical reason why the people who choose to make a career of military service to the nation should be paid less than their civilian counterparts who, for the most part, don't have to put up with the same dangers and inconveniences. When military and civilian pay match, this coincidence is called "comparability." It was achieved briefly in 1972 when it became apparent that a volunteer armed force had to be at least as attractive as employment in the civilian sector. But it slid backwards as politicians who gave lip service to volunteerism decided it was too expensive. The result was the "hollow Army" of the late 1970s.

Comparability was regained in 1981, but only after several years of campaigning by groups representing all the members of the armed forces and by a relative handful of Senators and Congressmen who recognized the inequity.

Now in the midst of severe budget deficits and six years of declining defense budgets, it is a fact that the principle of comparability has been submerged once again.

Hard experience has shown the armed forces that whenever military pay falls behind comparability with civilian pay they can expect to begin losing good people.

In the past when the Secretary of Defense and Congress recognized a dangerous widening of the comparability gap, they formulated and passed legislation to correct the situation. When they delayed doing so, they usually found themselves with more problems than they had bargained for. Before the present situation worsens, the Administration and Congress must give evidence of their true concern for the most valuable asset our national defense establishment possesses—its devoted career people. They also must make sure that compensation for valued military service does not again fall below comparability with pay in the civilian sector.