

Defense Report

from AUSA's Institute of Land Warfare



AMERICA'S MILITARY POOR

The rationale behind the administration's push for capping military pay below the growth rate expected in civilian pay over a three-year period was straightforward: such action would help control growth in the federal deficit by reducing defense budget outlays. **But at what price?**

A study by RAND's National Defense Research Institute shows that the civilian-military pay gap had grown to 11.7 percent by fiscal year 1992 from a FY 1982 base line. The Pentagon calculates that the gap is now at 12.3 percent and projects that it could grow to more than 20 percent by FY 1999 if full cost of living increases are not provided.

The claim can be made that the gap will make no difference in recruiting because joining the military is still a good deal for an 18-year-old high school graduate. However, the impact of the pay gap on future reenlistments will certainly be felt among servicemembers at the higher enlisted grades — the more experienced military personnel, the NCOs, the men and women who are the backbone of the military. The same can be said for experienced officers who must decide to continue service beyond obligated periods. And this will affect readiness.

Seventy-five percent of our enlisted forces earn less than \$30,000 per year. Studies show that among Army personnel, 45 percent earn less than \$20,000 a year.

Three percent of this nation's servicemembers already qualify for food stamps; one percent, or about 17,000, receive them monthly. The value of Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program coupons redeemed in commissaries alone was \$12.4 million in FY 1992, and \$15.2 million in FY 1993.

Current pay and allowances often do not meet the needs of families transferred to high-cost areas where costs, not including housing, can be 19 percent above the national average. Current housing allowances often do not cover the cost of off-base housing, especially for junior enlisted personnel.

Comparing military pay and compensation with corresponding pay and compensation for similar civilian occupations should be done cautiously, since the demands on most of their private sector counterparts don't compare with those of servicemembers. In an era of severe budgetary restraints affecting infrastructure, manpower and equipment, the demands on America's military continue to increase in response to crises around the world.

Even after the demise of the Soviet threat, American forces have fought in the Persian Gulf War and continue to respond to a host of contingencies and crises around the world. Special units such as the Army's 82nd Airborne Division are constantly on call. Marines had barely returned from six months at sea near Europe and Somalia when they were called back to respond to the administration's decision to increase forces around Haiti. With 48 percent of the Navy's fleet at sea, sailors find themselves deployed afloat for increasingly longer periods as they perform extra missions such as the war on drugs. Air Force HC-130 aircraft crews were deployed for nearly 200 days in 1993. By late July, thousands more American servicemembers were aiding Rwandan refugees. A potential crisis in Korea looms in the background.

But while demands on American military forces increase, quality of life — and morale — continues to erode. Central to quality of life and morale is compensation. And as mid-

DEFENSE REPORT is published by the Association of the United States Army's Institute of Land Warfare. The series is designed to provide information on topics that will stimulate professional discussion and further public understanding of the Army's role in national defense. Questions regarding the **DEFENSE REPORT** should be directed to: AUSA, Institute of Land Warfare (Attn: **DEFENSE REPORT**), 2425 Wilson Blvd, Arlington, VA 22201.

August 1994/DR 94-8

level grade servicemen and women decide that a military career is no longer worth the sacrifice to themselves and their families and begin to leave, readiness will be adversely affected. If the pay gap is not closed, chances are that the services would not be able to recover from severe outfluxes of personnel, resulting in a continuing deterioration in our ability to respond to crises.

Military pay and compensation must keep up with actual costs of living. America's military men and women, who

pride themselves on their self-sufficiency, should never have to rely on social programs in order to be able to live in decent housing and provide for their families. It is degrading that anyone could even conceive of a term such as "the military poor" in referring to America's armed forces.

It is lamentable that military pay has been allowed to deteriorate and is being curtailed as a deficit reduction tool. But the gap between military and civilian pay must be closed, **because the cost of not doing so is incalculable.**

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