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Subject: Pay raise approved for troops, but no cash for entitlements

Military Update: Pay raise approved for troops, but no cash for entitlement

<http://www.svherald.com/content/news/2010/05/14/military-update-pay-raise-approved-troops-no-cash-entitlements>

By Tom Philpott

A House panel has voted to give the military a 1.9 percent pay raise next January. That would be a half percentage point higher than what the Obama administration wanted simply to match private sector wage growth.

The House armed services subcommittee on military personnel panel also endorsed increases next year in hostile fire pay and family separation allowance, enough to restore the relative value of these payments to what they were in 2004 when they last were adjusted. But the same panel said the money tap is off for expanding entitlements to reserve personnel, disabled retirees or widows.

“The subcommittee continues to be frustrated by direct spending barriers that prevent us from making progress on concurrent receipt of military retirement pay and VA disability, the widow’s tax on the survivor benefits program annuity, and reform of retirement for reserve members,” said Rep. Susan Davis D-Calif., the panel’s chairwoman. In voting to continue a 12-year string of annual military raises set higher than wage growth nationally, the subcommittee ignored pleas from Defense officials not to drive up personnel costs this way and thereby squeeze dollars available for equipment, supplies and other readiness needs.

But Davis said the extra half percent raise will continue to narrow a pay gap with civilian peers, which stood at 13.5 percent in 1999 but will be down to 1.9 percent in January. Days earlier, outside pay experts told the Senate personnel subcommittee that the “gap” argument ignores the hefty gains made to military housing allowances over the last decade.

Military pay, they said, already is very competitive, particularly in this distressed economy. But Davis indicated nine years of war allow other facts to hold sway. It is, she said, “painfully apparent that the extraordinary high operations tempo has exacted a high penalty on our service members and

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their families.

Support for one more bump in military pay was unanimous on the 14-member subcommittee. Rep. Joe Wilson, S.C., ranking Republican, said "growing opposition" to adding an extra half percent "on the assertion that military pay now exceeds that of comparable civilian jobs.

That's a false comparison. I would challenge anyone to find a civilian job that has the same set of requirements and risks as military personnel face. As to the assertion that personnel costs are crowding out funds for other defense priorities, Wilson said the answer is bigger defense budgets, not "asking military personnel to take less."

Both Davis and Wilson expressed regret that dollars couldn't be found for other personnel priorities involving expansion of entitlements for reservists, disabled retirees and certain widows drawing survivor benefits. Money couldn't be found, for example, to support President Obama's call again to allow concurrent receipt of retired pay and disability compensation to 103,000 Chapter 61 retirees who were forced by disability to leave service short of full 20-year careers.

Obama has asked that these retirees be allowed to draw Concurrent Retirement and Disability Pay. However, his budget request failed to earmark money to pay for this initiative with its estimated cost of \$5.4 billion over its first 10 years. The House personnel subcommittee couldn't find the money either.

Nor could the panel find money to lower from 60 the age at which reserve retirement begins, or to end the offset of Survivor Benefit Plan payments for widows who choose to draw VA Dependency and Indemnity Compensation. DIC is payable to a surviving spouse if a service member dies on active duty and if the member dies in retirement from service-connected ailments or injuries.

"I intend to attempt to address these issues at the full (armed services) committee mark-up," Wilson said. "But offering amendments to make these changes to the defense bill become mere gestures if hundred of millions of dollars can't be found to pay for them.

When the full committee takes up the bill later this month, details will become available on planned increases to hostile fire pay and family separation allowances. The House bill also would authorize TRICARE to extend health care coverage to dependent children out to age 26, and to restore housing allowances for dual military couples serving on sea duty.

TO COMMENT, write Military Update, P.O. Box 231111, Centreville VA 20120-1111, or by e-mail milupdate@aol.com. Look for his column every Saturday in the Herald/Review.