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Military Pay and Benefits: Key Questions and Answers

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Military Pay and Benefits: Key Questions and Answers

SUMMARY

In the late 1990s, the military services were facing considerable recruiting and career retention problems. In responding, Congress was mindful of how low pay had contributed to decreased recruit quality in the late 1970s. It authorized larger pay raises, increased special pays and bonuses, more recruiting resources, and repeal of planned military retired pay reductions for future retirees.

In the midst of these efforts, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, took place, providing a sense of national unity and military purpose. The 9/11 attacks and the programmatic changes noted above initially helped recruiting substantially in the early 2000s. However, initial recruiting results for the first few months of 2005 indicate that the grueling pace of deployments to and from Iraq and Afghanistan, combined with the dangers of combat, have finally begun to cause long-anticipated recruiting problems. Career retention is difficult to measure, due to the suspended separation and retirement of many personnel since September 11, 2001, but so far retention has been more than satisfactory.

Debate continues over what kinds of pay and benefit increases are best for improving recruiting and retention. Of particular interest is the balance between across-the-board pay raises on the one hand, and ones targeted by grade, years of service, and occupational skill, on the other; and between cash compensation on the one hand and improvements in benefits such as housing, health care, and installation services on the other.

Basic Pay. The across-the-board increases in military pay discussed each year

relate to military basic pay, which is the one element of military compensation that all military personnel in the same pay grade and with the same number of years of service receive. However, numerous other elements are in the total military compensation “package.” These other elements are important in determining whether a “pay gap” exists between military and civilian pay that favors civilians, because the numerous different elements of military pay make it difficult to compare to civilian salaries and other benefits.

Since the early 1990s, numerous changes in benefits have greatly favored individual members. These include changes in the cash allowance received by personnel not living in military housing; a drastic overhaul of military health care; and repeal of military retired pay cuts first enacted in 1986.

2005 Military Pay Raise. President Bush’s FY2006 budget, requested a 3.1% across-the-board military pay raise, effective January 1, 2006. The most recent military pay raise, effective January 1, 2005, was 3.5% across-the-board.

Military Death Benefits. In early 2005, support grew for increasing the benefits provided to survivors (usually spouses or parents) of military personnel killed in Iraq or Afghanistan. DoD responded by proposing such increases on February 1, 2005. Similar death benefit increase packages were enacted by the House and Senate in their versions of the FY2005 supplemental appropriations act (H.R. 1268).

MOST RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

On April 21, 2005, the Senate passed its version of the FY2005 emergency supplemental appropriations bill for funding costs related to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (H.R. 1268, 109th Congress); included is a substantial increase in military death benefits similar, but not identical, to that contained in the House version..

BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

1. Why Did the Adequacy of Active Duty Military Pay Become a Major Issue Beginning in the Late 1990s?

Since the end of the draft in 1972-1973, the “adequacy” of military pay has tended to become an issue for Congress for one or both of two reasons: if it appears that

- the military services are having trouble recruiting enough new personnel, or keeping sufficient career personnel, of requisite quality; or
- the standard of living of career personnel is perceived to be less fair or equitable than that which demographically comparable civilians (in terms of age, education, skills, responsibilities, and similar criteria) can maintain.

The first issue is an economic inevitability on at least some occasions. In the absence of a draft, the services must compete in the labor market for new enlistees, and — a fact often overlooked — have always had to compete in the labor market for more mature individuals to staff the career force. There are always occasions when unemployment is low, and hence recruiting is more difficult, and others when unemployment is high and military service a more attractive alternative. The second situation, while often triggered by the first, is frequently stated in moral or ethical terms. From that viewpoint, even if quantitative indexes of recruiting and retention appear to be satisfactory, it is argued that the crucial character of the military’s mission of national defense, and its acceptance of the professional ethic that places survival below mission accomplishment, demands certain levels of compensation.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, several new factors caused recruiting and retention problems severe enough to force Congress to once again deal with this issue. Among the factors cited by analysts were (1) a public impression that the end of the Cold War, meant that military service was no longer interesting, relevant, or even available as a career option; (2) the post-Cold War drawdown in active duty military manpower by 40%, which greatly reduced real and perceived enlistment and career retention opportunities; (3) the 1990s economic expansion, which led to the explosive growth of actual and perceived civilian career options; (4) a rise in civilian consumer living standards against which military families measure their own economic success or failure; (5) concerns over increased family separation due to more operations and training away from home, whether “home” was in the United States or in foreign countries; and (6) a decreased propensity for military service among

young people for other reasons, such as anti-military parents and educators; skepticism about new missions such as “operations other than war,” “peacekeeping,” or “peace enforcement”; and the availability of government educational assistance from other sources (“the GI Bill without the GI”).

2. What Kinds of Increases in Military Pay and Benefits Have Been Considered or Used in the Past?

Many military compensation analysts have strongly criticized across-the-board rather than selective pay raises. They argue that across-the-board increases fail to bring resources to bear where they are most needed. Percentage increases targeted on particular pay grades and number of years of service (often referred to as “pay table reform”) and special pays and bonuses targeted on particular occupational skills, they suggest, would maximize the recruiting and retention gains for the compensation dollars spent. Across-the-board increases also affect a variety of other costs; retired pay, for instance, is computed as a percentage of basic pay. (However, there have been proposals to include special pays and bonuses in retired pay calculations, precisely to provide an additional incentive for the recipients to stay in service.)

The services already do a great deal of such targeting, having maintained a large system of special pays and bonuses since the end of conscription almost 30 years ago. Personnel managers report no indication that such targeted compensation has had the deleterious effects on morale and cohesion that some had feared. Across-the-board pay increases, however, are believed by many to have the advantages of simplicity, visibility, and equity. If everyone gets a similar percentage increase, nobody can feel, or can claim, that he or she has been left out. It also shows up immediately, in the person’s next paycheck, rather than months or years later when a particular individual is next eligible for a lump sum special pay or bonus (some special pays and bonuses are paid monthly or biweekly, as part of regular pay). It appears certain that, as in the past, overall increases in military cash compensation over the next several years will combine both across-the-board and targeted increases. Both of these increases, because of their broad appeal, may well be the most psychologically sound approach in improving recruiting and retention as much as possible. In addition, there has been bipartisan support voiced for major increases in Montgomery GI Bill benefits, although these tend to be among the most costly benefit increases being considered.

Recruiting and retention problems are not necessarily solved only by increasing military pay. Many components of the military compensation system that are important to recruiting and retention efforts, especially the latter, do not involve cash pay. These include health care; housing; permanent change of station (PCS) moving costs and policies; exchanges, commissaries, and other retail facilities; and recreational facilities. A wide range of views about existing military personnel management practices suggests that the services’ requirements for both new enlistees and career people could be significantly reduced by changing often long-standing and inter-related assignment, promotion, career development, or retirement policies. Survey research also reveals that the sense of patriotism, public service, and *esprit de corps* found in capable and combat-ready armed forces is extremely significant to both new enlistees and career members.

Furthermore, there are always limits to what increased compensation, whether cash or in-kind, can do to help any organization cope with personnel difficulties. Job and career

satisfaction; public and elite views of the importance and legitimacy of the military as an institution; unit morale; success in operational deployments and especially in combat — these may well be independent of compensation variables. High “scoring” in these intangibles, especially for a unique organization and culture like the Armed Forces, can and frequently does balance more tangible problems in compensation. However, few analysts believe that recruiting and retention rates can be brought up to service target levels without continuing to maintain the momentum of recent pay raises, given the need of the services to compete for capable individuals with the civilian sector. Many long-time observers seem to feel that money alone cannot keep a person in the military for a full career if the person does not like the military culture; they assert that the lifestyle is too demanding and too arduous for most. At the same time, it is argued that people can be driven out of the military if their compensation and living standards are not at least somewhat close to those of their demographic and educational counterparts in civilian life.

3. How Are Each Year’s Increases in Military Pay Computed?

Definitions. The across-the-board increases in military pay discussed each year relate to military basic pay. Basic pay is the one element of military compensation that all military personnel in the same pay grade and with the same number of years of service receive. Basic allowance for housing, or BAH, is received by military personnel not living in military housing, either family housing or barracks. Basic allowance for subsistence, or BAS, is the cost of meals. All officers receive the same BAS; enlisted BAS can be one of two similar rates, based on the type of assignment. A federal income tax advantage accrues because the BAH and BAS are not subject to federal income tax.

Basic pay, BAH, BAS, and the federal income tax advantage all comprise what is known as Regular Military Compensation (RMC). RMC is that index of military pay which tends to be used most often in comparing military with civilian compensation; analyzing the standards of living of military personnel; and studying military compensation trends over time, or by service geographical area, or skill area. Basic pay is between 65 and 75% of RMC, depending on individual circumstances. RMC specifically *excludes* all special pays and bonuses, reimbursements, educational assistance, deferred compensation (i.e., an economic valuation of future retired pay), or any kind of attempt to estimate the cash value of non-monetary benefits such as health care or military retail stores.¹

Annual Percentage Increases in Military Basic Pay.

Military Basic Pay Raises Linked to Federal General Schedule (GS) Civil Service Pay Raises. Permanent law (37 USC 1009) provides that monthly basic pay is to be adjusted upward by the same “overall average percentage increase in the General Schedule [GS] rates of both basic pay and locality pay for [federal] civilian employees,” and is to “carry the same effective date.” The upward adjustment is based on the GS percentage pay increase that would result from operation of the permanent statutory GS pay raise formula. It need not, therefore, be identical to the actual percentage increase in GS pay, if

¹ For a detailed discussion of the costs and value of monetary and non-monetary benefits, see *Military Compensation: Balancing Cash and Noncash Benefits*. Economic and Budget Issue Brief. Congressional Budget Office, January 16, 2004.

Congress acts to either (1) authorize a GS pay increase different from that which would result from operation of the permanent formula for a particular fiscal year and/or (2) authorize a different military pay increase that differs from operation of the permanent formula.

How GS Civil Service Pay Raises Are Computed. The GS formula employed here is that specified in 5 USC 5303(a). It is based on (but is not identical to, as will be discussed below) the increase in the Employment Cost Index (ECI) calculated by the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics. The ECI measures annual percentage increases in wages for all private-sector employees, although it can be subdivided to measure increases in specific categories of such employees. The precise ECI increase used for pay purposes is computed by comparing the ECI for the third quarter of the calendar year preceding that in which the pay increase is budgeted with the ECI for the third quarter of the year preceding the latter year. For example, assume the GS civilian pay raise for fiscal and calendar year 2005, under current law to be first paid on January 1, 2005, is being computed. The FY2005 federal budget that includes this pay raise will be debated and enacted in calendar year 2004, beginning with the transmittal of the Administration's FY2005 budget to Congress in early 2004. This latter budget, however, was prepared beginning in the middle of 2003. The pay raise in this budget can only be based on the extent to which the ECI for the third quarter of 2003 had increased over that for the third quarter of 2002. There is thus a lag of approximately six months between the end of the ECI increase measuring period and the transmittal of the proposed pay raise based on it to Congress and a lag of 15 months between the end of the ECI measuring period and the actual percentage increase in civil service pay, and hence active duty military pay, on which it is based.

The actual percentage increase in GS pay is not the percentage increase in the ECI over the time frame described. The applicable statute [5 USC 5303(a)] provides that the overall increase in federal GS pay will be 0.5% *less* than the percentage increase in the ECI. The money thus saved is frequently cited as being available to provide larger pay raises to federal civilians in high-cost-of-living metropolitan areas within the United States, although there is no statutory requirement that the "saved" money be used for this purpose. For example, if there is a 5% increase in the ECI from the previous year, and the cost of raising all federal GS pay by 5% would be \$5 billion yearly, federal GS civil servants would actually receive a pay raise of 4.5%, costing a total of \$4.5 billion. The \$500 million thus saved could, if the executive branch and/or Congress so desired, be applied to pay for raises higher than 4.5% in high-cost-of-living areas. In this example, military personnel could thus get a 4.5% pay raise. This formula led to the actual pay raises received in 1993 (FY1994), 1994 (FY1995), 1995 (FY1996), 1997 (FY1998), and 1999 (FY2000). [The statute does allow the overall percentage increase to be allocated among the different pay grade and years-of-service categories, subject to various limitations, rather than giving all personnel identical percentage increases. This was in fact done in 2000. See 37 USC 1009(d).]

Congress Usually Passes a Military Pay Raise Anyway, Despite the Permanent Formula. Despite the existence of this statutory formula, which would operate each year without any further statutory intervention, Congress has legislated a particular percentage increase in military pay every year since 1980, with the exception of 1982. The percentage increase in military pay was usually identical to that granted GS civilians during the period 1982-1999 (the exceptions were in 1985 and 1994, when Congress provided larger increases in military pay). However, beginning in 2000, Congress has provided larger increases in military pay each year. Even when the percentage increase

has been identical for both military and civilian pay, in most cases Congress has explicitly reiterated the increase in law rather than simply allowing the permanent statutory linkage to operate. Therefore, although Congress may legislate the pay raise percentage, until recently it was a *pro forma* matter, and the operation of the permanent formula remains important in determining what the percentage will actually be.

Annual Increases in Basic Allowances for Housing (BAH) and Subsistence (BAS). Housing (37 USC 403) and subsistence (37 USC 402) allowances are paid to all personnel not living in military housing or eating in military facilities or using field rations. Monthly BAH varies by rank, by whether the person has dependents, and, most importantly, by location. Monthly BAS is uniform for all officers regardless of rank or dependents, but there are two types of enlisted BAS: “when authorized to mess separately” and “when rations in-kind are not available”; the former is the one received by the overwhelming majority of enlisted personnel. Annual increases in BAH and BAS are both based on surveys of local housing and national food costs respectively, and thus are not affected by the annual percentage increase in the ECI. (For many years BAH and its predecessors and BAS were subject to the annual percentage increase; this was not changed until the late 1990s.) There have been occasional proposals to survey the housing costs on which BAH is based more frequently than once a year, due to rapidly rising housing costs in many areas of the United States. Particular emphasis is placed by supporters of more frequent surveys on fast-rising electricity costs, notably for heating and cooling. In addition, there have been calls to merge BAS with basic pay and reduce the complexity of military compensation and the need for BAS computations each year.

4. What Have Been the Annual Percentage Increases in Active Duty Military Basic Pay Since 1993 (FY1994)? What Were Each Year’s Major Executive and Legislative Branch Proposals and Actions on the Annual Percentage Increase in Military Basic Pay?

The following subsections itemize action on the active duty military basic pay increase going back to 1993 (the FY1994 budget). *Unless otherwise noted, all increases were proposed to be effective on January 1 of the fiscal year indicated. The same is true of discussions of future pay raises.*

2005 (FY2006). *Statutory formula:* 2.6%. The statutory formula for the federal GS civilian pay raise would result in a 2.1% raise in FY2006. As described below, current law provides, through FY2006, that the military pay raise be 0.5% higher than the civil service raise. Therefore, without further congressional action, the FY2006 raise will be 2.6% (2.1% + 0.5%), effective January 1, 2006. *Administration request:* 3.1% across-the-board, included in President Bush’s FY2006 defense budget, released February 7, 2005. *Congressional action:* none yet.

2004 (FY2005). *Statutory formula:* 3.5%. *Administration request:* 3.5% across-the-board. *Final version:* FY2005 NDAA (Sec. 601, P.L. 108-375, October 28, 2004; 118 Stat. 1811). 3.5% across-the-board. [Unlike the years 1999-2003 (FY2000-FY2004), the Administration did not request and the Congress did not enact, a “targeted” increase based on which particular pay grades and years-of-service cohorts need more pay to improve career retention.]

2003 (FY2004). *Statutory formula:* 3.7%. *Administration request:* Average 4.1%; minimum 2.0%; maximum of 6.5%. *Final version.* FY2004 NDAA (Sec. 601, P.L. 108-136, November 24, 2003; 117 Stat. 1392). Average 4.15%: floor 3.7%; maximum 6.25% for some senior NCOs. Also included language requiring that after FY2006, the annual military pay raise would be equal to the annual percentage rise in the Employment Cost Index (see above, #4, for a description of the ECI), thus repealing previous law that had the effect of mandating a pay raise equal to the ECI *minus* 0.5%. Existing temporary law, enacted in 1999 in the FY2000 NDAA, which requires an increase equal to the ECI plus 0.5% during FY2001-FY2006, would not be changed. (See below under “Suspension of Statutory Formula during FY2001-FY2006.”)

2002 (FY2003). *Statutory formula:* 4.1%. *Administration request:* Minimum 4.1%; average 4.8%; for some mid-level and senior noncommissioned officers, warrant officers, and mid-level commissioned officers, between 5.0% and 6.5%. *Final increase:* identical to the Administration request, embodied, as usual, in the FY2003 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 107-314, December 2, 2002; 116 Stat. 2458). The House and Senate had also approved the Administration request.

2001 (FY2002). *Statutory formula:* 4.6%. *Administration request:* numerous figures for the “Administration request” were mentioned in the pay raise debate, depending on when and which agency produced the figures. In general, however, they all proposed increases of at least 5% and no more than 15% (the latter applying only to a very few individuals), depending on pay grade and years of service; the average increase for FY2002 was 6.9%. *Final increase:* Eventually, the FY2002 National Defense Authorization Act (Sec. 601, P.L. 107-107, December 28, 2001) endorsed an “Administration request” of between 5 and 10%, depending on pay grade and years of service. These increases remain the largest across-the-board percentage raises since that of FY1982, which took effect on October 1, 1981. The latter was a 14.3% across-the-board raise, which followed an 11.7% raise the previous year, FY1981, resulting in a two-year raise of almost 28%. This was principally in response to the high inflation of the late 1970s.

2000 (FY2001). *Statutory formula:* 3.7% (based on the 1999/FY2000 legislation, above; the original statutory formula would have led to a proposed raise of 2.7%). *Administration request:* 3.7%. *Final increase:* The FY2001 National Defense Authorization Act (Section 601, P.L. 106-398, October 30, 2000; 114 Stat. 1654A-1 at A-143) approved the 3.7% figure. In addition, as was the case in the previous year, additional increases averaging 0.4% (based on the size of the across-the-board raise the amount of money used would have funded; the range of additional percentage raises was between 1.0 and 5.5%) were provided to middle-grade officer and enlisted personnel, to be effective July 1, 2001.

1999 (FY2000). *Statutory formula:* 4.8%. *Administration request:* 4.4% on January 1, 2000, but in addition, on July 1, 2000, a wide range of targeted increases averaging an additional 1.4% (again, based on the size of across-the-board raise the cost of the targeted increases would finance) in mid-level officer and enlisted grades’ pay levels. *Final increase:* The FY2000 National Defense Authorization Act (Section 601, P.L. 106-65; October 5, 1999) raised the January 1, 2000 increase to 4.8%, and accepted the July 1, 2000 targeted increases.

Suspension of Statutory Formula during FY2001-FY2006. The FY2000 defense authorization contained a six-year suspension of the existing statutory formula, which became effective in FY2001. In enacting this suspension, the House version would have required that the full ECI increase (not the ECI less 0.5%) be used in calculating the annual pay raise starting in FY2001 and thereafter. The Senate version would have required that the annual raise be the full ECI *plus* 0.5% (i.e., a full percentage point above what permanent law then read) during FY2001-FY2006. The Senate version prevailed in conference. This latter provision is still in effect as of FY2005. Naturally, any congressional action following the enactment of this legislation supersedes it.

1998 (FY1999). *Statutory formula:* 3.1%. *Administration request:* 3.6%. The House approved 3.6%, or whatever percentage increase was approved for federal GS civilians, whichever was higher. The Senate approved 3.6%. *Final increase:* The FY1999 Strom Thurmond National Defense Authorization Act (Section 601, P.L. 105-261; October 17, 1998; 112 Stat. 1920 at 2036) approved the House alternative, which resulted in a 3.6% military increase, as GS civilians also received 3.6%.

1997 (FY1998). *Statutory formula:* 2.8%. *Administration request:* 2.8%. *Final increase:* FY1998 National Defense Authorization Act (Section 601, P.L. 105-85, November 18, 1997; 111 Stat. 1629 at 1771): 2.8%.

1996 (FY1997). *Statutory formula:* 2.3%. *Administration request:* 3.0%. *Final increase:* The House and Senate both approved the higher Administration request of 3.0%, and it was therefore included in the FY1997 National Defense Authorization Act (Section 601, P.L. 104-201, September 23, 1996; 110 Stat. 2422 at 2539).

1995 (FY1996). *Statutory formula:* 2.4%. *Administration request:* 2.4%. *Final increase:* Congress also approved 2.4% in the FY1996 National Defense Authorization Act (Section 601, P.L. 104-106, February 10, 1996; 110 Stat. 186 at 356).

1994 (FY1995). *Statutory formula:* 2.6%. *Administration request:* 1.6%; one percent less than the statutory formula. *Final increase:* The FY1995 National Defense Authorization Act (Section 601, P.L. 103-337, October 5, 1994; 108 Stat. 2663 at 2779) authorized the statutory formula figure of 2.6%.

1993 (FY1994). *Statutory formula:* 2.2%. *Administration request:* No increase; military (and civil service) pay would have been frozen in FY1994. The Administration also proposed limiting future civil service — and hence active duty military — pay raises to one percentage point less than that provided by the existing statutory formula. None of these proposals was adopted. *Final increase:* The FY1994 National Defense Authorization Act (Section 601, P.L. 103-160, November 30, 1993, 107 Stat. 1547 at 1677) authorized 2.2%.

5. Is There a “Pay Gap” Between Military and Civilian Pay, So That Generally Military Pay Is Less than That of Comparable Civilians? If So, What Is the Extent of the “Gap”?

The allegations of a military-civilian “pay gap” beg several questions:

- How can the existence of a gap be determined and the gap be measured?
- Is there a gap, with civilians or the military being paid more? If so, how much of a gap?
- If there is a gap, does that in itself require action?
- What are the effects of such a gap?

A wide range of studies over the past several decades has compared military and civilian (both federal civil service and private sector) compensation. In general, the markedly different ways in which civilian public and private sector compensation and benefit systems are structured, compared to that of the armed forces, make it difficult to validate any across-the-board generalizations about whether there is a “gap” between military and civilian pay. Some advocates for federal civil servants argue that federal civilian pay lags behind private sector pay, which in turn leads some people, given the linkage between civil service and military pay percentage increases, to infer that military pay lags behind private sector pay. However, because the current statistic used to measure private sector pay, the ECI, measures annual percentage increases and not dollar amounts, no such inference is really possible.

As noted above, the debate, in recent years, over “pay parity” between the military and federal civil service pay increases, involves the percentage amount of the civilian pay raise. It has not, so far, involved the military pay raise proposal at all. The issue has been whether the civil service should get a percentage raise identical to that of the military, or whether the military should get a higher raise because of (1) the much greater degree of danger and hardship military service entails, compared to most civilian employment, especially in time of war, and (2) the need to cope with actual or forestall potential military recruiting and retention problems.

Measuring and Confirming a “Gap”. It is extremely difficult to find a common index or indicator to compare the dollar values of military and civilian compensation. First, military compensation includes numerous separate components, whose receiving population and taxability varies widely. Which of these, if any, should be included in a military-civilian pay comparison? Furthermore, total military compensation includes a wide range of non-monetary benefits: health care, retail stores, and recreational facilities. Few civilians work in organizations where analogous benefits are provided. Attempts to facilitate a comparison by assigning a cash value to non-cash benefits almost always founder on the large number of often arbitrary assumptions that must be made to generate such an estimate.

Second, it is also extremely difficult to establish a solid comparison between military ranks and pay grades on the one hand, and civilian jobs on the other. The range of knowledge, supervision, and professional judgment required of military personnel and civilians performing similar duties in a standard peacetime industrial or office milieu may well be similar. When the same military member’s likely job in the field, possibly in combat, is concerned, comparisons become difficult.

Third, generally speaking, with some exceptions, the conditions of military service are frequently much more arduous than those of civilian employment, even in peacetime, for families as well as military personnel themselves. This aspect of military service is sometimes cited as a rationale for military compensation being at a higher level than it otherwise might be. On the other hand, the military services all mention travel and adventure

in exotic places as a positive reason for enlistment and/or a military career, so it may be misleading to automatically assume it is only a liability.

Fourth, comparisons between different sets of compensation statistics, and the use of these comparisons to determine what military pay should be, can yield very different results. Comparing *dollar amounts* may lead to different conclusions than comparing the *annual increases* in pay for each position. The percentage increase in pay over different time periods is more often than not very different. Different indexes with different components can be used to determine compensation changes.

Finally, the level of specificity used in a pay comparison can lead to sharply differing results, especially when the comparison is between private sector and federal pay as a whole, both civil service and military. For instance, all Army colonels may, according to some indexes, be paid roughly as much as federal civil service GS-15s, or as much as private sector managers with certain responsibilities. Thus, those occupational specialties that are highly paid in the private sector — health care, information technology, some other scientific and engineering skills, are examples — are frequently paid considerably less in the military or in the civil service. Other common subcategories for comparison, in addition to occupational skill, include age, gender, years in the labor force, and educational levels.

Estimates of a Military-Civilian Pay Gap. Numerous comparisons of military and civilian compensation in recent years have been cited to illustrate a gap that favors civilian pay levels or refutes the existence of such a gap. Many of these reports lack precision in identifying what aspects of military pay were compared with civilian pay; what indexes were used to make the comparison, or the length of time covered by the comparison. Although it is difficult to generalize, it would appear that most of those estimates which assert that there is a pay gap in favor of higher civilian pay quote a percentage difference of between 7 and 15% in recent years.

Estimates have been made that question the existence of a gap favoring civilians. These tend to compare specific populations of military personnel with equally specific subcategories of civilians. Analyses of this nature appear to be less common than the across-the-board comparisons, almost certainly because they are much more difficult to do.²

In 2002 General Accounting Office (GAO) analysts itemized the components of the military benefit package — such as military retirement, health care, Servicemember's Group Life Insurance; base recreational facilities, and the like — and compared them with the private sector. It found that the range of benefits available to military personnel was generally comparable to, and in some cases superior to, benefits available in the private sector. The GAO study did not appear to have made dollar-figure comparisons or compared in military non-cash benefits — such as health care, commissaries or exchanges, or annual

² See, for example, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. *Report of the Ninth Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation. Volume I.* Washington, March 2002: passim, but especially 29-74, 137-82, 188-89; and Asch, Beth J., and James R. Hosek. *Military Compensation: Trends and Policy Options. Documented Briefing.* Santa Monica, CA, Rand Corporation, 1999:

leave — with similar benefits in the private sector, either by figuring out their dollar worth or by itemizing their exact provisions in great detail.³

Finally, it should be noted that the substantial increases in military pay and benefits since the late 1990s, whatever the existing relative relationship of military to civilian compensation as of that time, have probably had the effect of favoring the military.

If There Is a Pay Gap, Does It Necessarily Matter? Some have suggested that the emphasis on a pay gap, whether real or imagined, or if real, how much, is unwarranted and not a good guide to arriving at sound policy. They argue that the key issue is, or should be, not *comparability* of military and civilian compensation, but the *competitiveness* of the former. Absent a draft, the armed forces must compete in the labor market for new enlisted and officer personnel. The career force by definition has always been a “volunteer force,” and thus has always had to compete with civilian opportunities, real or perceived. Given these facts, it is asked what difference it makes whether military pay is much lower, the same, or higher than that of civilians? If the services are having recruiting difficulties, then pay increases may be appropriate, even if the existing “gap” favors the military. Conversely, if military compensation is lower than equivalent civilian pay, and if the services are doing well in recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of qualified personnel, then there may be no reason to raise military pay.

However, some believe that explicitly basing military compensation on “purely economic” competitiveness with civilian pay could have undesirable consequences: for instance, in a time of economic difficulty, the military might be receiving lower pay than most civilians but still recruiting satisfactorily due to high unemployment.

For further discussion of the “pay gap” issue, see Congressional Budget Office, *What Does the Military “Pay Gap” Mean?* June 1999; and Association of the U.S. Army, *Closing the Pay Gap*, Arlington, VA, October 2000.

6. What Benefits Are Specifically Available For Military Personnel Participating in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF — Service in Afghanistan)?⁴

Hostile Fire/Imminent Danger Pay. Many military personnel participating in OEF and OIF may be eligible for Hostile Fire or Imminent Danger Pay (HF/IDP). HF/IDP is authorized by 37 U.S.C. 310, which provides a special pay for “duty subject to hostile fire or imminent danger.” While DOD regulations distinguish between Hostile Fire Pay and Imminent Danger Pay, both are derived from the same statute, and an individual can only collect Hostile Fire Pay or Imminent Danger Pay, not both simultaneously. The purpose of this pay is to compensate servicemembers for physical danger. Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait,

³ *Military Personnel: Active Duty Benefits Reflect Changing Demographics, but Opportunities Exist to Improve.* Report no. GAO-02-935. Washington, U.S. General Accounting Office [now Government Accountability Office], September 18, 2002.

⁴ Much of this material is taken from Lawrence Kapp, *Operations Noble Eagle, Enduring Freedom, and Iraqi Freedom: Questions and Answers about U.S. Military Personnel, Compensation, and Force Structure.* CRS Report RL31334, Updated September 16, 2004.

Saudi Arabia, and many other nearby countries have been declared imminent danger zones. Military personnel serving in such designated areas are eligible for HF/IDP. To be eligible for this pay in a given month, a servicemember must have served some time in one of the designated zones, even if only a day or less. The authorizing statute for HF/IDP sets the rate at \$150 per month. However, the FY2004 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) (Sec. 619, P.L. 108-136, November 24, 2003; 117 Stat. 1392) temporarily increased this rate to \$225 through December 31, 2004. The FY2005 NDAA made this increase permanent. (For some detailed background on HF/IDP, see *Military Pay: Controversy Over Hostile Fire/Imminent Danger Pay and Family Separation Allowance Rates*, CRS Report RS21632, Updated October 8, 2003.)

Hardship Duty Pay. Military personnel serving in Iraq, Afghanistan, parts of the Persian Gulf region, and certain nearby areas are also eligible for Hardship Duty Pay. HDP is authorized by 37 U.S.C. 305. It is compensation for the exceptional demands of certain duty, including unusually demanding mission assignments or service in areas with extreme climates or austere facilities. The maximum amount of HDP permitted by the statute is \$300 per month. The current rate of HDP for Iraq and Afghanistan is \$100 per month.

Family Separation Allowance. Military personnel participating in OEF and OIF may also be eligible for Family Separation Allowance (FSA). FSA is authorized by 37 U.S.C. 427, which provides a special pay for those servicemembers *with dependents* who are separated from their families for more than 30 days. The purpose of this pay is to “partially reimburse, on average, members of the uniformed services involuntarily separated from their dependents for the reasonable amount of extra expenses that result from such separation....” To be eligible for this allowance, U.S. military personnel must be separated from their dependents for 30 continuous days or more; but once the 30-day threshold has been reached, the allowance is applied retroactively to the first day of separation. The authorizing statute for FSA sets the rate at \$100 per month. However, Section 606 of the FY2004 NDAA temporarily increased the FSA rate to \$250 per month through December 31, 2004. The FY2005 NDAA made this increase permanent.

Per Diem. Military personnel serving in OIF/OEF are also entitled to per diem payments of \$105 per month; the rate is the same for all personnel.

Savings Deposit Program. Another benefit available to those deployed to Afghanistan, Iraq, and other designated areas nearby is eligibility for the Savings Deposit Program. This program allows service members to earn a guaranteed rate of 10% interest on deposits of up to \$10,000, which must have been earned in the designated areas. The deposit is normally returned to the servicemember, with interest, within 90 days after he or she leaves the eligible region, although earlier withdrawals can sometimes be made for emergency reasons.

Combat Zone Tax Exclusion. One of the more generous benefits for many of those serving overseas in OEF or OIF is the “combat zone tax exclusion.” Afghanistan and the airspace above it have been designated a “combat zone” since September 19, 2001. Military personnel serving in direct support of the operations in this combat zone are also eligible for the combat zone tax exclusion. Additionally, certain areas in the Persian Gulf region — including Iraq — have been designated combat zones since the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War. Military personnel serving in direct support of operations in this combat zone are also

eligible for the combat zone tax exclusion. For enlisted personnel and warrant officers, this means that all compensation for active military service in a combat zone is free of federal income tax. For commissioned officers, their compensation is free of federal income tax up to the maximum amount of enlisted basic pay plus any imminent danger pay received. While this benefit applies only to federal income tax, almost all states have provisions extending the benefit to their state income tax as well.

In addition, military personnel who receive a reenlistment bonus while stationed in a combat zone do not have to pay federal income tax on any of the bonus. The amounts involved can be substantial. For example, the Army recently increased reenlistment bonuses for Special Forces NCOs to a lump sum of \$150,000 for a six-year reenlistment; \$75,000 for five years; \$50,000 for four years; and \$30,000, \$18,000 and \$8,000 for three, two, and one year respectively. Other reenlistment bonuses for a wider range of military occupational specialties have been increased to up to \$50,000 for a five-year commitment.⁵

Rest and Recreation (R&R) for Personnel In OIF/OEF. As has been widely reported, military personnel serving 12-month tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan are entitled to one 15-day period of “R&R” or home leave in the United States during their tour. Initially the program was designed to fund the travel of personnel from either theater of operations to whichever airport in the United States they landed in, and any further travel within the United States had to be funded by the individual. However, Congress has since authorized funding of internal travel within the United States. Reimbursement will be for the military member’s travel; there is no funding for dependent travel to meet military personnel on R&R. (There has been some funding of such dependent travel by private charitable organizations.)

Additional Benefits for Some Personnel in OIF/OEF.

Extra Pay for Soldiers With Involuntarily Extended Tours. Approximately 20,000 Army soldiers whose 12-month tour in Iraq has been involuntarily extended by 90 days are being paid an additional \$1,000 per month, composed of an extra \$200 per month in Hardship Duty Pay for the maximum HDP amount of \$300/month (HDP is already being paid to all OIF/OEF personnel at a \$100 per month rate); and another \$800 per month in Assignment Incentive Pay (37 USC 307 authorizes a maximum of \$1,500 per month in Assignment Incentive Pay to be paid to personnel serving in any assignments designated as eligible for such pay).

Extra Pay for Soldiers Who Voluntarily Reenlist in OIF/OEF. Army soldiers between the rank of specialist/corporal (pay grade E-4) and staff sergeant (E-6), who reenlisted between March 18, 2003 (the date before OIF began), and September 18, 2004, and volunteered for assignment in Iraq, Kuwait, or Afghanistan, were eligible for a \$5,000 lump sum bonus. They had to have had at least 17 months of military service and no more than 10 years. If they had already received another reenlistment bonus, they could have had the larger of this latter bonus and the \$5,000, but not both.

⁵ Tice, Jim. “Critical-skills bonus program is expanding,” *Army Times*, March 7, 2005: 28.

7. What Cash Lump-Sum Death Benefits are Available to the Survivors of Military Personnel Killed in Iraq or Afghanistan, and What Increases in Such Benefits Have Been Proposed?

Currently, the survivors (usually spouses or parents) of military personnel who die while on active duty (including reservists on active duty) are entitled to several lump-sum monetary benefits. These include a **\$12,420 death gratuity**, payable within a few days of the death to assist families in dealing with immediate expenses; a **\$255 Social Security lump sum**; coverage of **burial expenses up to \$6,900** [a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefit]; **and Servicemembers Group Life Insurance (SGLI) of \$250,000** (all servicemembers are automatically enrolled in this benefit, which is paid for by an approximate \$16 monthly deduction from pay; members may opt out or reduce the coverage, but less than 1% do so);. There are also a wide range of recurring-payment survivor benefits from both DoD and the VA, as well as non-monetary benefits.⁶

Apparently responding to public and congressional concerns, in hearings before the Senate Armed Services Committee on February 1, 2005, the Bush Administration endorsed an increase in the death gratuity to \$100,000 from the current level of \$12,420, and of the maximum SGLI benefit from \$250,000 to \$400,000. DoD would pay the actuarial cost of the additional \$150,000 insurance, rather than increasing the premiums for individual military members. The increased benefits would be retroactive to October 7, 2001, when the United States first began military operations against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, four weeks after the 9/11 attacks. However, the testimony revealed differences within DoD on these benefits. The DoD proposal would provide the increased benefits only to personnel in a combat zone. The vice chiefs of staff of the Army and Air Force; the Vice Chief of Naval Operations, and the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, however, argued that the increased death benefits should be provided to all military personnel who die in the line of duty, not just those in combat zones.⁷

Both the House and Senate versions of the FY2005 supplemental appropriations bill (H.R. 1268, 109th Congress) contain increases in death benefits. Both versions would (1) raise the death gratuity from the current \$12,420 to \$100,000 for survivors of all military personnel who die on active duty after the bill's enactment; increase the maximum SGLI coverage from the current \$250,000 to \$400,000 (the Senate, but not the House, version, provides for the government to pay the premiums for the initial \$150,000 of coverage if the person is serving in a combat zone).

⁶ For the earlier legislative history of some of these benefits, monetary and non-monetary, see Office of the Secretary of Defense. *Military Compensation Background Papers*. Fifth Edition. September 1996: 615-36; 683-97; and 853-55. A more detailed summary of all such benefits and a comparison of them with federal civilian and state and local government survivor benefits is at U.S. Government Accountability Office. *Military Personnel: Survivor Benefits for Servicemembers and Federal, State, and City Government Employees*. GAO Report GAO-04-814. Washington, July 2004.

⁷ Graham, Bradley. "Military Chiefs Criticize Curbs In Plan To Raise Death Benefits," *Washington Post*, February 2, 2005: 20; and Gilmore, "Pentagon, Senate, seek doubling of GI survivors' benefit," *Air Force Print News*.

There are several differences between the two bills regarding the retroactivity of these increased death benefits. Both the House and Senate versions would pay an additional \$88,000 (which, when combined with the \$12,000 death gratuity currently in statute, would bring the retroactive payments to the post-enactment total of \$100,000) to the survivors of certain servicemembers who died after October 7, 2001, (when the United States first began military operations against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan). The House version would pay the additional \$88,000 to survivors only of personnel killed in Iraq or Afghanistan; the Senate would pay the additional amount to survivors of military personnel killed in Iraq or Afghanistan or who die elsewhere as a result of “combat or combat-related activities” after the October 7, 2001 date. Similarly, the House bill would pay an additional \$150,000 in SGLI (bringing the previous \$250,000 maximum up to the post-enactment total of \$400,000) to the survivors of military personnel who died “in the performance of military duty” after October 7, 2001; the Senate criteria for the additional \$150,000 would cover deaths occurring “as a result of combat, training for combat, hazardous duty, or an instrumentality of war.”

The Senate bill would also allow survivors of military personnel killed on active duty to remain in military housing for up to one year, rather than the existing six-month limit.

For more information on military death benefits, see CRS Report RL31334, *Operations Noble Eagle, Enduring Freedom, and Iraqi Freedom: Questions and Answers about U.S. Military Personnel, Compensation, and Force Structure*:10-13; and CRS Report RL32873, *FY2005 Supplemental Appropriations for Iraq and Afghanistan, Tsunami Relief, and Other Activities*: 26-28.

FOR ADDITIONAL READING

Army Times, Navy Times, Marine Corps Times, and Air Force Times, weekly issues, dated Monday of each week.

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