



AIR FORCE SERGEANTS ASSOCIATION

ISSUE: Congress must act to stop reductions in military pay raises and to ensure relative comparability with private sector wages. To do otherwise particularly harms enlisted members and their families.

BACKGROUND/DISCUSSION: Philosopher and writer George Santayana famously said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” At the advent of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) in 1973, national leaders determined that an AVF could only successfully support the quality recruiting and retention that would be required if the military pay tables were redesigned to roughly parallel the wages of civilians with similar education, experience, and skills. However, since then, as economic challenges have arisen (most often as the result of government policies and decisions), national leaders have used military pay caps and cuts to quality-of-life programs to cut spending. History has shown that this is an unwise, somewhat callous decision which directly penalizes those who serve at unlimited liability and do so much to make freedom possible. When our national leaders do this, it strongly suggest that George Santayana was right.

Throughout the 1970s, such pay caps were enacted, resulting in serious retention and readiness deficits. In 1981 and 1982, significant catch-up pay raises were enacted to try to undo the harm of previous decisions, to reestablish approximate “pay comparability,” and to maintain the success of the AVF. So how, in light of those lessons, did national leaders then act? They continued capping military pay raises over the next decade and a half. By 1999, AFSA and our Military Coalition partners urged correction, citing a 13.5 percent gap that had grown between military pay and private sector wages (as measured by the Employment Cost Index (ECI))--and the resultant serious retention and readiness problems.

Over the next several years, Congress took action by approving raises one-half percent over the ECI until it was satisfied that we had finally gotten it right—for military members and for the AVF. Current law calls for annual military pay raises equal to the annual ECI measurement—unless the President uses executive authority based on an economic crisis or national emergency. However, should it choose to do so, Congress can vote to override such decisions. In the past three years, legislators have passively acquiesced to the Executive Branch which has cut military pay raises. For example, instead of a 2.3 percent pay raise for 2016 as called for by law, the President’s FY 2016 Defense Bill calls for cutting that pay raise to 1.3 percent.

AFSA POSITION: We contend that the current formula provides pay raises that are neither excessive nor unwarranted. By receiving the already-modest pay raises, military members are at least able to minimally cope with current conditions in the nation’s economy. The impact of recent decisions to annual cut pay raises below ECI comparability negatively compounds each year throughout military service and for the rest of their lives for those who serve full military careers. Such decisions have the effect of trying to solve government-caused economic problems by harming military members, their spouses, and their children. They should not be called on to pay that price. Congress must act now to fight for annual military pay raises that at least ensure comparability with private sector wages. *Moreover, we urge the members of Congress to consider the bold move to make these annual military pay raises “Must Pay” based on the current ECI-paralleling formula.* Our nation’s defense and the willingness of those who serve would benefit by such a legislative effort.

KEY BILLS/STATUS: Currently there are two versions of H.R. 1735, the FY 2016 National Defense Authorization Act. By remaining silent on the matter, the House version would allow a 2.3 percent pay raise; the Senate version specifies that it will be 1.3 percent.