

Letters to the editor

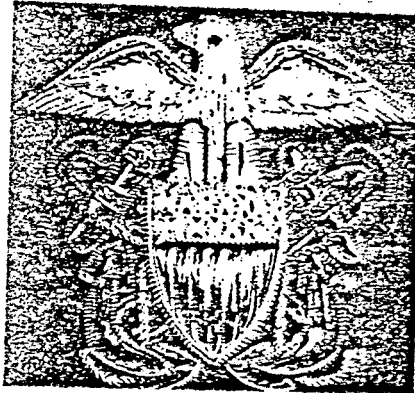
'In the Navy it's up or out'

Although as a retired naval officer I am not the most detached of observers on the question of retired officer employment and compensation, I can speak with personal knowledge of some aspects of retired officerhood which seem to have eluded many who speak out on this subject, notably the President and — incredibly — Admiral Stansfield Turner.

First, the term "retired" as applied to such officers is imprecise and misleading. A military officer who finds himself in this status did not, in the majority of cases, arrive there voluntarily.

The military service is, quite rightly, a young man's game, and there are strict limitations imposed by Congress on the number of officers who can be retained on active duty in each grade. From a total of over 60,000 naval officers on active duty, the numbers dwindle in the higher grades to about 50 flag officers. Except for those selected to be one of these 50, everyone else of comparable longevity has to go. In the Navy, it's "up or out" — there are no long-term, paper-pushing jobs wherein one can sit collecting pay (and obstructing progress) until some magical age is attained. A naval officer either gets promoted when he is due, or he goes.

Due to proportionately greater grade restrictions in the grades of captain (bird colonel) and rear admiral (two-star), most compul-



sory severances occur to commanders not selected for captain, and to captains not selected for rear admiral.

Their non-selection is not indicative of egregious incompetence, since no incompetent would have made it to the selection point; it is primarily due to the statutory restrictions on numbers who may be selected. There may, for example, be a group of 400 military and managerial geniuses available for selection; nevertheless, only 50 of them can be selected for flag rank — the rest have to go.

By this point in their lives, these gents have spent over 20 years in the Navy and are in their mid-40s. They are energetic and accomplishment-oriented, and they are on the street, many without a marketable skill other than a knowl-

edge of military affairs and the ability to manage and make decisions. Their general competence is indicated by the large numbers who are successful in second careers, even in the face of economic and social prejudice.

It is, I assume, in recognition of the possibility of early and involuntary career termination that Congress saw fit to provide a guaranteed income to severed officers. Partly, this income is designed to offset relatively low active-duty pay over the years and partly as a retainer, because the officer is subject to immediate recall to active duty if he is needed.

Whether military officers' services are worth such pay is, of course, for Congress to decide — as well as for the officer. If he perceives it as a ripoff, he will from economic necessity forego the service early on and won't stay around to be possibly non-selected at age 45.

Or, as now seems likely, the military officer will emulate his fellow citizens, form a political power bloc, and simply demand the wages he feels he deserves. If either of these eventualities come to pass, the service, and the country, will be the worse for it.

Second, in the present context, the important thing about so-called "retired pay" is that it has been earned fairly and squarely. The amount and the terms were part of the deal between the officer and the government from the outset — a deal made with full public knowledge and a deal in which the severed officer fulfilled his part under constant scrutiny and examination. Entitlement to this pay should in justice have absolutely no effect on an officer's subsequent employment, whether with the government or in the private sector. His fitness for a job is in no way affected by his financial status, whether it is based on previously invested income or its equivalent. To characterize such earned pay as vaguely dishonest and somehow a clever fleecing of the public is manifestly unjust.