

### VETERAN DISABILITY COMPENSATION AND THE ARMY PROFESSION: GOOD INTENTIONS GONE AWRY

Leonard Wong  
Stephen J. Gerras

For 40 years, from 1960 to 1999, about 8 percent of the veteran population received disability compensation. In 2000 the percentage edged up to 9 percent or 2.3 million veterans. By 2018 the percentage had tripled to 24 percent or 4.7 million veterans. Although many researchers attribute this upward trend to the influx of wounded from the Iraq War and the Afghanistan War, the authors show that favorable legislative action, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) policy changes, societal developments, and improved information flow enabled and encouraged many more veterans to file for disability. The rise in the number of veterans receiving disability compensation signaled a cultural transformation concerning disability compensation that would eventually spread throughout the US Army and the other services.

The culture surrounding disability compensation gained strength after the 9/11 attacks as it moved from loosely connected groups of veterans to units in the repetitively deployed Army reserve components. Eventually, the culture developed in active units as participants in the VA Benefits Delivery at Discharge program and a surge of retirees in the Department of Defense shared their insights about the disability process with those still in uniform. Underlying the situation is the good-news story that more soldiers and veterans have gained awareness of a valuable entitlement and are understanding the process for obtaining the entitlement. Today, nearly two-thirds of all soldiers depart the Army with a disability rating. Unfortunately, the data also point to less benign implications for the military.

Many of today's soldiers are exploiting a generous veteran disability compensation system overextended

far beyond its original purposes. Three consequences of this exploitation deserve the profession's attention. First, if the Army is viewed as complicit in encouraging soldiers to capitalize on an overly permissive entitlement, the trust between society and the Army may be strained. Second, rising disability rates may affect readiness should the substantial lifelong annuity of disability compensation be added to the total cost of bringing a soldier onto active duty. Fortunately, these two consequences have yet to occur. Unfortunately, the third consequence, which has already materialized and is the authors' main concern, is today's soldiers are reconceptualizing disability compensation as something earned and subsequently owed to them. Soldiers believe they are owed disability compensation—not for a debilitating injury or disease, but the hardships of service as a soldier. Viewing disability compensation as recompense for the sacrifices and selflessness demanded of soldiers allows soldiers to rationalize the exploitation of a permissive disability system. This unsettling development is diluting the profession's principle of duty and undermining the Army's concept of selfless service.

The authors propose a two-pronged strategy to address this situation. To reduce the likelihood of using the hardships of service to rationalize capitalizing on a lenient disability system, the Army must minimize any needless sacrifices demanded of today's soldiers. The recently unveiled *Army People Strategy* is a step in the right direction. Unfortunately, the financial gain from an easily manipulated disability system will continue to be alluring until the overall VA disability system is reevaluated and reformed. Because Congress, the VA, and veterans

service organizations all have an interest, a voice, and a vote in any reform to the disability system, the Army should request the formation of an independent commission tasked with developing a mutually agreed-upon solution that will address the detrimental impact disability compensation is having on the military profession. This call for reform is driven not by fiscal considerations but by the desire for the Army to remain both an esteemed institution trusted by society and an honorable profession marked by selfless service.

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