



5 June 2013

Letter to the Editor, Washington Post

RE: In Support of Our Commissaries

The article "Plan to shut military supermarkets shows difficulty of cutting defense spending" by Rajiv Chandrasekaran that was published on June 1, represents a highly inaccurate and incomplete argument against one of the staples of military benefits. In his article, Chandrasekaran labels commissaries as an unnecessary aspect of the budget and a burden to taxpayers. According to the author and his sources, these services (including healthcare, child care and schools located on domestic bases) are unneeded luxuries that are being provided to our military personnel and Veterans. The author and his cited "experts" have concluded that if this spending is not stopped, that the Defense Department will be forced to order reductions in troop strength, training, and equipment to combat this "fastest-growing part" of the Defense Department's budget.

Chandrasekaran's real point is that rising personnel costs are an issue for the defense department, as they are for most large corporations. Rapidly increasing health care costs are a serious issue as they are for all Americans. That said, his focus on military commissaries is nothing but a red herring. Contrary to the article, commissaries are not a huge financial burden to the nation. The funding provided in the President's proposed budget for the coming fiscal year is miniscule compared to other aspects of the budget. There is also no actual evidence that any cuts to the military will have to be made if we don't close these supermarkets. Commissaries also provide a 6:1 return to the Department of Defense (DoD) on every dollar that is spent in order to provide this benefit to our military families. So commissaries are actually returning money back into the economy (far from the resource abusing institution as described in the article), as well as employing around 14,000 full-time employees.

All supermarkets make choices concerning both every day and sale pricing. Military commissaries focus their attention on those items most needed by young families. Higher end goods therefore subsidize the staples. The effect of this is to support young, primarily enlisted, families. While military salaries have become competitive over the last decade there is still a gap and the commissary benefit helps to fill that gap. It is a small benefit but an important one particularly to that young person whose spouse is deployed far away.

If there is anything that Americans have always supported and agreed upon, it is freedom. And, as is often seen, this freedom that is enjoyed by all who live in this nation, comes at a price. By signing up to be in the military and fight for these freedoms, our brave servicemembers (who make up less than 1% of the population) pay the ultimate sacrifices for something that is often taken for granted. Something as simple as grocery stores for these hard-working and sacrificing military members and their families provide a small incentive and benefit compared to all that they sacrifice. If we can no longer find the support for something as small as this, what can be said about how much we value those that protect our freedoms?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Casey Coane". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

RADM Casey Coane, Executive Director
Association of the United States Navy (AUSN)