

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, GEORGE LISICKI  
REMARKS FOR DELIVERY  
HOUSE AND SENATE VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE  
TUESDAY MARCH 4, 2008

Chairmen Akaka and Filner, Ranking Members Burr and Buyer, my fellow VFW comrades and honored guests...

It is an honor to be here today to represent the 2.3 million men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. and our Auxiliaries. We are this nation's largest organization of combat veterans and we are this nation's oldest major veterans organization.

As we sit here today in safety, there are over 180,000 brave men and women in the deserts of Iraq and the mountains of Afghanistan... and many more in far-off lands. They are fighting on our behalf in a war to which this Congress sent them. Make no mistake, **the VFW supports their mission and we are behind each and every one of them 100 percent!**

For many of us, the sacrifices we face in this war are few. However, for a great many Americans, the families and friends of and the million or so men and women who have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan or the millions more who have worn the uniform around the globe, the sacrifices are numerous and real. The struggles are real... The fears, the difficulties, the stresses and strains are real.

These are things that we of the VFW deeply understand. Although today's missions might be different, the emotions and shared sacrifice are the same... whether experienced on the beaches of Normandy, the frozen mountains of Korea, the jungles of Vietnam, or the blistering sand of Kuwait ... wherever we have served. All of us who have worn the uniform at a time of conflict feel that deep bond... that sacred emotion that unites us as brothers and sisters. It is that bond that brings us here today – a bond that grows throughout our lives and with successive generations.

We represent not just our members, but our brothers and sisters in uniform both past, present and future. Today, we urge Congress to fulfill this nation's obligation to her defenders – to ensure that all of our veterans receive every benefit and all the healthcare they have earned through their service to this country. **The VFW and America will stand for no less!**

One of the highest priorities for this nation is to ensure sick and disabled veterans receive the best possible healthcare. The VFW applauds the efforts of you in Congress over these past years to increase funding for veterans health care. You have recognized that the treatment of our former defenders at home is connected to the wars of today. You have helped millions of veterans to live healthier lives and deal with their disabilities. **We of the VFW salute you!**

As is the case every year, you have received a budget from the President that does not meet the needs of veterans. We look to you – as we have in the past – to correct the shortfalls and to follow the recommendations we have laid out in the Independent Budget.

Overall, we find that the VA budget is \$3 billion short. Within that, veterans healthcare is \$1.6 billion below what is needed to provide timely access to high-quality healthcare.

Waiting lines are growing again. Secretary Peake testified at recent budget hearings that there are nearly 70,000 veterans forced to wait months for their earned healthcare. This is unacceptable. Neither you nor I would stand for it, so why should America's sick and disabled veterans? This is why we need you to again bridge the gap and provide **full funding for VA healthcare**.

I should note that the administration has again proposed increasing prescription drug copayments and creating an annual enrollment fee. **The VFW is strongly opposed to these unjust fees.** We earned our healthcare when we put on our uniform. **The VFW calls on you to again defeat them!**

The additional \$1.6 billion we are asking for in healthcare will go a long way towards paying the ongoing costs of war. We have all seen the horrific stories about PTSD and other mental health problems our newest veterans face.

The battles are mostly hidden from public view, but they are very real for those on the front lines. Nobody goes into battle and returns the same person. We are all affected. Some of us just handle it differently.

These brave men and women must have proper mental healthcare services. They need to deal with their emotions so that all can have the peace of mind to live a normal life. You must use your oversight powers so that VA does what is right. **The VFW expects no less!**

The President's budget request is also a step backwards on construction. VA needs more money to build more hospitals and clinics so that all our veterans – especially those in rural areas – have convenient access to care.

The VFW certainly appreciates the dramatic increases in VA funding over the last few years, but it has been nine years since VA had a budget on time. VA simply cannot efficiently spend money or properly plan with a budget that is consistently late.

Late budgets make VA's already tough job in attracting physicians and specialists even more difficult. Veterans demand and expect an assured funding stream that is sufficient, timely and predictable. To adequately care for our sick and disabled veterans, **we must** reform the budget process!

VA must also focus more on those who have fought on the front lines in Iraq and Afghanistan -- our wounded warriors.

We must work hard on the range of issues confronting them. TBI, PTSD, amputations, blindness – whatever their condition, we have a sacred obligation to heal them and care for their disabilities. VA must have more funding for research into these essential issues. Our wounded warriors must receive every advantage we can give them to include specialty care outside VA when appropriate. **We cannot let this generation down! Our heroes deserve the best!**

In this regard, we were pleased to see the best parts of the Dole/Shalala Report included in the Defense bill. The VFW strongly believes that the transition benefits that became law will make a meaningful impact in thousands of young lives.

The VFW is greatly concerned, however, with the Dole-Shalala recommendations to recklessly overhaul the disability compensation system.

Let me be clear: **The VFW will not support a separate disability system that compensates veterans with similar wounds differently based on when they served.** There is no difference between a 22-year old shot in the leg on Iwo Jima 63 years ago and a 22-year-old shot in the leg yesterday in Fallujah. One generation of veterans is not more deserving than another. Separate systems would clearly be unfair, and **the VFW will not stand for it!**

We are not here to be naysayers or obstacles to progress. We have called on Congress to look closely at the comprehensive report of the veterans disability benefits commission, a study that was over three years in the making. We don't agree with everything in that report... but the amount of time and energy that went into it on the serious and complex issues of compensation are worthy of closer study.

VA's disability compensation system clearly has issues. But these issues run deep. With over 800,000 veterans waiting month after month for a decision, and with decisions very often wrong, there is no easy fix. We need strong leadership and training from VA's managers. We need innovative solutions and new approaches. But we also need some patience – patience for the thousands of newly hired VA ratings employees to learn the difficult job and then to begin reducing the backlog.

Patience, however, is difficult for those of us on the other side of the bureaucracy.

Patience is difficult for a disabled veteran who has been waiting months for a check to help put food on the table for his or her family. And patience is difficult for the wounded warrior who has been waiting months for an accurate decision after having been blown up on the battlefield.

But there is **no easy solution** to this problem. There is no grand fix. Any changes we make to the system must truly be beneficial to all disabled veterans, and **not** just an attempt for quick action. We owe all of those who were injured while serving this country no less.

Compensation is just one part of the transition benefits provided to help our soldiers become citizens again. Chief among these is the GI Bill. We salute the efforts of Senator Jim Webb who has done so much in his short time in Congress to advance this essential issue!

His goal is our goal, a GI Bill modeled on the World War II version that pays for the true costs of college.

Those on the front lines have an experience that fortunately most Americans will never have. We want them to be **our future leaders**. Accordingly, they must have a GI Bill that gives them a true opportunity for success. Just as important, his bill also recognizes the valiant contributions of America's Guard and Reserve forces. **The VFW urges swift action on this important bill!**

We need meaningful employment programs so that our veterans can have high-quality jobs to dramatically reduce the veterans unemployment rate. We need a strong, effective and accountable Veterans Employment and Training Service and a Vocational Rehabilitation program that leads to meaningful careers, not temporary jobs.

But before we get to this stage in a veteran's life, we need to ensure that there is a smooth transition from active duty to veterans status – a truly seamless transition. The VFW envisions a system with a single medical and personnel file created the day someone enlists.

We want this file to follow them wherever they are stationed and shift with them to VA once they separate or retire. This will improve their healthcare and accelerate the disability claims process.

We must ensure that veterans have access to all the separation and transition services available to them. This is especially true of those in the Guard and Reserve who live in rural areas. They often come home far away from the other members of their unit, thrust immediately into a very difficult transition with limited access to the essential transition services this government provides.

We need leadership from all involved to battle through the turf wars on these essential issues. **We need you to do what is right!** Taking care of veterans and military personnel is not a partisan issue. **It is an American issue!**

All of these transition issues are critical because they can help forestall the national tragedy of the growing number of homeless veterans, especially among our OEF and OIF veterans. We must do everything we can to give them a hand up to get back on their feet.

Although not under the purview of your committees, I would be remiss if I did not say a few words about the debt that we owe the tremendously brave men and women currently fighting on our behalf around the world and their families.

We must improve the benefits provided to them in recognition of their continued service. We must increase their pay and ensure that housing options are plentiful, especially for the hundreds of thousands trying to raise families while volunteering for this country. We must have outreach and benefits targeted to their spouses and children, especially as the length and frequency of deployments increase. And for our military retirees, we must continue to oppose TRICARE fee increases!

We need to let our service men and women know that the **VFW stands with all of America** in supporting their dedication and we appreciate the sacrifices they are making!

Before I conclude, I should also make mention of an issue very important to me – the VFW's unwavering commitment to obtaining the fullest accounting for those warriors still missing.

The POW/MIA mission is our most sacred, and none of us will rest until we know the whereabouts of every one of our men and women who have served in uniform and paid a heavy price. We urge full funding for this vital mission and a renewal of our obligations. That is our duty to our brothers and sisters.

Mr. Chairmen, that obligation to our brothers and sisters does not end once we trade our uniform for a business suit, a dress or some blue jeans. That unique bond – forged in combat by shared experiences – fills us with the need to serve. I know those of you who were in the military

understand that desire – that pull that brings me here today. All of us are “**Veterans Forever Serving.**”

We now ask all of you to serve on our behalf... to provide this nation’s veterans with the full range of benefits and services all of us have earned. The fighting might end when the last bullet is fired, but this nation’s obligations do not. We ask for you to ensure that this nation meets its sacred obligation to those who have borne the battle. **The VFW and this entire country expect no less!**

Mr. Chairmen, we sincerely look forward to working with you and your excellent and dedicated staffs on these important issues. I would like to thank you for allowing us to testify today and I would be pleased to answer any questions that you or the members of these two great committees may have.

Thank You!