

I want to thank Tony Gallo and the National Press Club for this opportunity to discuss what the Veterans of Foreign Wars expects from President-elect Trump and the 115th Congress.

Bottom Line Up Front: The VFW expects effective leadership, management, and accountability from everyone who is charged with caring for veterans, service members and their families. This includes elected and appointed officials as well as Civil Service employees.

The VFW is pleased that funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs has been secured for FY 2017, but we still don't have a defense budget that properly funds a military that is still at war, or the numerous Quality of Life programs that support our troops and their families. The temporary funding CR expires in a month. Congress must finish the job they were elected to do and not kick the can down the road.

Regarding funding, the VFW's top legislative priority continues to be the elimination of sequestration. It is the most significant military and national security threat of the 21st century.

It was created five years ago when Russia wasn't in the Ukraine, when China wasn't building islands out of rocks, when ISIS didn't exist, and when North Korea and Iran weren't as emboldened as they are right now.

You cannot expect the military to downsize in both manning and budget while it still fights a two-front war, and expands its presence elsewhere. I have lived the military's ethos of mission accomplishment no matter what. It destroys morale, and once the economy recovers, could possibly end the viability of an All-Volunteer Force.

Sequestration is destroying our military. It is forcing the Army to reduce from a wartime high of 570,000 active-duty soldiers to 420,000. It is forcing our military to weigh people programs against modernization programs, and against current operations and maintenance requirements.

Until now, the VA has been exempt from sequestration, but no one said that will be the case in the future, since half of VA's budget comes through the discretionary process.

The budget caps must be adjusted because right now they are preventing Congress from passing important improvements to VA health care delivery, the expansion of the caregiver program, additional toxic exposure research, among many others advancements. The caps need to be adjusted to truly reflect the need of veterans.

Despite almost universal congressional opposition to sequestration, no member of the House or Senate has yet introduced any legislation to end it. The question I ask you to ask of your own elected officials is why not?

Before I take questions, I just want to say a few words about the Phoenix VA and where we are two years later.

Phoenix was Ground Zero only because it imploded first.

As it would be learned later on, Phoenix was the accumulation of system-wide failures that could have been prevented if leadership in the field had just spoken up.

What started out as a goal to see new patients within 30 days was misinterpreted in the field as a metric. Then add in the fact the thousands of vacant positions, to include clerical staff, which forced doctors and nurses to do paperwork instead of seeing more patients.

Then add in that warrior ethos I spoke of earlier, which is alive and well in the VA, too, where asking for help might be perceived as weak leadership.

It is a Catch-22 that most Americans don't understand, or why the quickly passed *VA Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014* couldn't immediately fix all the problems a vigilant press helped to expose.

So what does America's largest and oldest major veterans' service organization expect from the new President, the new Administration and the new 115th Congress? Action, Patience, Clarity.

Knowing that the VFW has helped to enact every significant military and veteran quality of life initiative in the 20th and now 21st century gives us a pedigree for action, the patience to recognize that problems that took years to develop cannot be solved overnight, and the clarity to recognize real problems, not just symptoms. I look forward to your questions.