

VFW Fires Back at Defense Official

'Don't pin budget blame on service members or retirees'

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WASHINGTON — "Any attempt to link rising military personnel costs with shrinking military readiness is total nonsense," said Thomas J. Tradewell Sr., who leads the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S., the largest and oldest major combat veterans' organization.

"If the Defense Department needs a larger budget for personnel programs, then let the VFW carry that message to Congress. Just don't pin the budget blame on service members and military retirees."

Tradewell's ire is targeted at the new DOD undersecretary of personnel and readiness, Clifford L. Stanley, who in testimony yesterday before the personnel subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said "Rising personnel costs could dramatically affect the readiness of the department."

His predecessor, Dr. David Chu, took the same position in a January 2005 *Wall Street Journal* article, by saying "The amounts have gotten to the point where they are hurtful. They are taking away from the nation's ability to defend itself."

"What's hurtful," said Tradewell, a combat-wounded Vietnam veteran from Sussex, Wis., "is a continuing perception that DOD is more concerned about the budget than they are about recruiting and retaining a professional volunteer force that's been at war now for more than eight years."

According to Wednesday's testimony, last year was the military's most successful recruiting year since the establishment of the all-volunteer force in 1973. Stanley, a retired Marine Corps major general, said in order to continue that recruiting trend, "The department must provide a compensation package comparable and competitive to the private sector. At the same time," he said, "we must balance the demands of the all-volunteer force in the context of growing equipment and operations costs."

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The VFW national commander said any attempt to compare the wages and benefits of those who are fighting a two-front war and those who are not is pointless. "The military contract requires extended time away from family under extremely hazardous conditions, with being hurt or killed on the job a very real possibility. No civilian contract requires the same conditions for employment," he said.

"War is expensive and so is the cost of fielding an all-volunteer military, as well as retaining the best so that they can lead the force while training their successors. Our troops only ask for our respect and for better pay, better benefits, and better support programs for themselves and their families," said Tradewell.

"It is a sacred responsibility that this nation provides her defenders something more tangible than just the privilege of fighting and dying for their country."