

Defense Budget Breaks Faith with Troops

Feb 14, 2012

America's military is the strongest and most powerful on Earth because it takes care of the people who take care of the mission, but the nation's largest combat veterans organization believes that two principal proposals in yesterday's fiscal year 2013 budget request for the Department of Defense are going to be "deal breakers" with the troops.

"We will not allow the nation's economic problems drive a military downsizing strategy that breaks faith with every man and woman who has ever worn the uniform," said Richard L. DeNoyer, national commander of the 2 million-member Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. and its Auxiliaries. "We will not allow the budget crisis to be more important than the men and women who serve and sacrifice to keep everything and everyone we hold dear safe."

DOD's proposal contains two recommendations that would significantly change military pay and benefits, which in a vocation as inherently dangerous as the military might convince some recruits not to join much less reenlist.

One proposal recommends 1.7-percent military pay increases for 2013 and 2014, and a mere half percent in 2015. Tied to pay changes is DOD's concurrence to create a Military Retirement Modernization Commission, which some in Congress already said should also examine the non-taxed status of military allowances, such as separate rations, housing and combat pay.

"The VFW is appreciative that the White House and Pentagon support grandfathering military retirees and those currently serving under the existing retirement system," said DeNoyer, "but our concern is for tomorrow's recruits, the young 18-year-old enlistees and new 22-year-old officers who will be fighting tomorrow's wars with the same force challenges as today—high operations tempos, too little dwell time, and not enough troops to meet worldwide threats and commitments."

The second proposal would force military dependents and retirees to pay more for their Tricare health programs.

DOD recommended a three-tiered annual enrollment fee for Tricare Prime, which over the

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next five years would quadruple existing fees for some working age military retirees—based on the amount of retirement pay received—and index future increases to medical inflation. Congress rejected a similar three-tiered proposal in 2006, and last year opted instead to link fee increases to annual cost of living adjustments. New this year are also proposals to institute one-tier annual enrollments and increased deductibles for Tricare Standard and Extra programs, a three-tiered fee for Tricare for Life coverage, and new pharmaceutical copays for everyone except uniformed service members.

DOD wants Tricare beneficiaries to use military treatment facilities to help reduce costs, but DeNoyer said every military family member and retiree is well aware how difficult appointments are already to schedule, which will become even harder with two more recommended Base Realignment & Closure Commission rounds.

“The new generation’s service and sacrifice to country will continue to be exponentially greater than the vast majority of Americans who choose not to serve, and that’s why defeating these negative Quality of Life proposals are top VFW legislative priorities,” said DeNoyer, a retired Marine and Vietnam combat veteran from Middleton, Mass.

“Keeping intact the incentive of a modest and immediate retirement stipend, and somewhat inexpensive healthcare for oneself and spouse for life, are not too high a cost for a nation to pay for the 1 percent of Americans who serve us in uniform, or the even fewer who stay in uniform 20 or more years.”

The VFW national commander is also wary of DOD’s plan to increase its reliance on the Reserve Component, since gone over the next five years will be more than 100,000 active-duty troops, primarily soldiers and Marines, even though the world remains an extremely dangerous and very unpredictable place. “America’s Guard and Reserve forces are magnificent, but they are equally tired after more than 10 years of war, and their capabilities are meant to complement the active force, not outright replace it,” he said.

The VFW regards budget-driven proposals to diminish pay and benefits as unconscionable and a breach of faith with those who serve and those who will follow.

“There is an inherent cost to fielding a professional, all-volunteer military, and breaking faith with our military and their families, and to deem their pay and benefits programs ‘too generous’ compared to corporate America, is insulting and totally forgetful of how much our nation asks of them,” said DeNoyer.

“It is for these reasons that the VFW will work with Congress to oppose all plans to make those who sacrifice the most for our country to sacrifice even more, and we will hold accountable those elected officials who support these proposals.”