

VFW Rebuts Center for American Progress Editorial Attack

'I CAN GUARANTEE THAT NOTHING THE VFW SAYS ABOUT PROTECTING MILITARY PAY AND BENEFITS IS MISLEADING'

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On Monday, three representatives of the Center for American Progress attacked the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. in an opinion editorial published in Politico. Entitled “[VFW, Allies Mislead On Pay, Benefits](#),” they criticized the VFW for opposing Pentagon budget-reduction plans that would reduce military pay increase percentages, civilianize the retirement system, and shift more TRICARE health program costs onto military dependents and retirees. VFW National Commander Richard L. DeNoyer responded to the attack in a 300-word [letter to editor](#) that was published in today’s issue of Politico. Below is the expanded version.

By Richard L. DeNoyer

Monday’s opinion editorial by Lawrence Korb, Alex Rothman and Max Hoffman would have readers believe that the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States is misleading America into believing that the Pentagon’s proposals to reform military compensation, retirement and healthcare are bad for the nation.

As the national commander of America’s oldest and largest combat veterans’ organization, I can guarantee that nothing the VFW says about protecting military pay and benefits is misleading. The Defense Department’s “budget first, people second” proposals are bad for America because they threaten the continued viability of the all-volunteer force. It takes people to fight and win our nation’s wars — to put boots on the ground as well as to operate our ships, planes and tanks. The VFW makes no apologies for wanting to protect those

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military programs that attract and retain our best and brightest in uniform.

The authors would have you believe that proposed military pay raises between .5 and 1.7 percent over the next five years will help rebalance the budget, yet they make no mention of the effect a resurging economy will have on recruiting and retention, much less the still volatile and unpredictable world that awaits our military of 2015 and beyond. They and others seem to have forgotten the huge recruiting and retention bonuses the military services had to offer just seven short years ago.

It is the constitutional responsibility of Congress to raise, support, and make rules for the regulation of our armed forces. And while DOD input is crucial for informed decisions, Congress must not be rushed into any “up or down” decision, similar to Base Realignment and Closure Commission votes, that could put a professionally-led, all-volunteer force at risk.

Based on earlier trial balloons, DOD wants a new military retirement system that would resemble more participatory, 401(k)-type civilian programs, with the delayed receipt of retirement benefits until almost age 60. Since less than 10 percent of the force stays 20 years or more — not 17 percent as reported by the authors — a civilianized military retirement system will hurt retention because a 401(k)-style retirement plan can be earned virtually anywhere, and in professions far safer than serving in the military.

Congress needs to carefully review and determine the potential impacts of such proposals on the force, because the immediate receipt of retirement pay and inexpensive healthcare for life for the retiree and spouse are the only two incentives the Pentagon offers to entice someone to first donate 20 or more years of their youth to the nation.

Our entire nation faces a health cost crisis, but change advocates want all military dependents and retirees to shoulder more TRICARE health program costs. They cite national averages and what federal civilian employees pay in an attempt to justify plans to more than quadruple TRICARE premiums for some retirees. They call military healthcare and the retirement system “too generous,” with some even referring to these earned benefits as something far more insulting — “entitlements.”

The authors would also have you believe that the Pentagon’s proposals are reasonable and fair, and should be supported by groups like the VFW, the Military Officers Association of

America, and other veteran and military service organizations. They even wrote that “Reforming the system of military compensation is necessary — and should be supported by all Americans.”

Yet the authors failed to present the whole picture in their argument. They focus on the overall monetary cost, but not the human cost that first requires decades of faithful service just to qualify — the multiple moves and hazardous deployments; children constantly uprooted from schools and spouses from any semblance of careers; zero home equity; potential age discrimination when applying for post-military employment; and now, being relegated to the expense ledger by the very department that was supposed to have your back.

Only 1.9 million of America’s 22.2 million veterans are military retirees. Their ranks include former military service chiefs and commanders, and exponentially more from the enlisted ranks — the rank and file who also help to define a professionally led, all-volunteer force. But during this budget debate, nobody seems to care about the people side of the equation; they only want to compare military pay, healthcare and retirement programs with civilians who choose not to serve.

Putting the budget ahead of the troops is going to signal an end to the all-volunteer force, which for 39 years and more than a decade of continuous war has served our nation extremely well. That is not a misleading statement; it is a dire warning, and we urge Congress to focus on the difference.