

VFW Against Retirement, TRICARE Changes

An opinion editorial by VFW National Commander Richard DeNoyer

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America's 10-year fight in the Middle East has produced a battle-hardened generation of young folks, who by and large have the full support and appreciation of a grateful nation. This is most welcoming to my generation of Vietnam veterans—who returned home to a vastly different reception.

But the post-9/11 generation is not yet returning to flowers and victory celebrations, not with 90,000 troops still in Afghanistan and hotspots elsewhere around the world. They are returning instead to an economy in turmoil and extremely high veterans' unemployment rates for those younger than 24, who are having difficulty translating military skills into a civilian asset, and the reluctance by some employers to hire Guard and Reservists who might get recalled to active duty. They also return trying to make sense of the past 10 years, extremely proud of what they accomplished but disconnected from a civilian public that has been unaffected by a decade of war. This is especially true on college campuses, which are as foreign to young veterans as boot camp would be on their student peers.

And for those who choose to stay in uniform, they return to an America that used to wait for the wars to end before she downsized her military.

January's announcement by Defense Secretary Leon Panetta paints a stark reality that DOD will do its share to rein in government spending. Gone over the next five years will be 100,000 soldiers and Marines, which will return active Army and Marine Corps end strengths back near pre-9/11 numbers. Gone beginning in fiscal year 2015 will be full military pay raises, which this year was just 1.6 percent. Also gone sometime within the next decade could be dozens more military installations and facilities, as additional base realignment and closure commissions have been recommended.

And gone could be the existing military retirement system, replaced with a more civilianized

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structure that is portable, participatory and possibly deferred, that focuses more on saving the government money than on providing a modest and immediate stipend to someone who first volunteers 20 or more years of their youth to the nation. Already gone is any semblance of free medical care for life, but still there are now new plans to force working age retirees and those 65-plus to pay even more for their earned healthcare programs.

Secretary Panetta and his service secretaries and service chiefs have a tough job ahead, not only because they have to reduce the overall defense budget by \$487 billion over the next decade, but because they have to do it in such a manner as to not break faith with a military still at war. DOD would be wise to also not break faith with America's veterans' service organizations, who give service members a collective voice on Capitol Hill, as well as serve as the military's greatest advocates and recruiting tools.

My organization, the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, is pleased to continually hear pledges from the White House and Pentagon that military retirees and those serving in uniform today will be grandfathered under the existing retirement system, but our concern is for tomorrow's recruits, the young 18-year-old enlistees and new 22-year-old officers.

Tomorrow's recruits are the ones who have to be convinced that the proposed 401(k)-style retirement program in a vocation as dangerous as ours is worth potentially losing life and limb in current and future conflicts. They are the ones who have to be convinced that the upcoming force reduction to "leaner and meaner" just isn't another rehash of doing more with less. Their families have to be convinced that "staying in" with hopes of possibly drawing some level of retirement pay and receiving some level of inexpensive medical care, is worth more years of constant moves, new schools and repeat deployments. And perhaps utmost, the powers that be have to convince themselves that all these negative Quality of Life changes on a military still at war will not destroy the all-volunteer force.

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 now, I'm not so sure, because it sure seems like the new military strategy is being driven by a cost-reduction budget, despite soundbites to the contrary. Technology is certainly a force multiplier, but it can't replace boots on the ground, ships at sea or manned aircraft. And constantly comparing civilian programs with military pay, retirement and healthcare plans—while calling the military programs "too generous"—is insulting, and so is any proposal that requires those who sacrifice the most for our nation to sacrifice even more.

Once the economy rebounds—and it will—DOD will no longer have the luxury of record recruiting and retention rates. The department will once again be forced to offer expensive enlistment and reenlistment bonuses to attract and keep the 25 percent of Americans who can meet the military's minimum health, aptitude and physical fitness standards. This, of course, presupposes the military doesn't lower its standards as it has in the past. Perhaps

my greatest fear is that all these changes to pay and benefits are going to create a mass exodus of midcareer officers and NCOs because they no longer feel appreciated or in control of their own military careers.

There is an inherent cost to fielding a professional, all-volunteer military, and the promise of a modest stipend immediately upon retirement and inexpensive healthcare for life for oneself and spouse are keys to retaining our best and brightest. It is for these reasons that the VFW opposes all plans to change the military retirement system, and we reject any proposal that would require military retirees to pay more for their earned healthcare programs.

Richard L. DeNoyer is the commander-in-chief of the 2 million-member Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. and its Auxiliaries. He is a retired Marine Corps officer and Vietnam combat veteran from Middleton, Mass.