

RPTS MCKENZIE

DCMN HOFSTAD

JOINT HEARING: LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION  
FROM THE DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS

Tuesday, March 4, 2008

House of Representatives,  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,  
joint with the  
United States Senate,  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,  
Washington, D.C.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:06 p.m., in Room 345, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Bob Filner [chairman of the committee] presiding.

Present from the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs: Representatives Filner, Hereth Sandlin, Hall, Walz, Buyer, and Boozman.

Present from the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs: Senators Akaka, Webb, and Burr.

The Chairman. Good afternoon. Thank you for being here. You can feel the energy in the room. And we welcome you to the joint committee of the Senate and the House Veterans' Affairs Committee.

And we are so glad to see you. As you know, these hearings were abandoned for a couple of years. Senator Akaka and I decided we need you here, and we are so happy that you are here. And you are here at a perfect time, in terms of the budget, and we will go over that in a few minutes. But I visited with a good crew from California, and you can just feel that everybody is energized. Thank you for being here. You energize us.

I would like to introduce you to the Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, who is from the Aloha State of Hawaii, and every day of his distinguished career he is fighting for veterans.

Thank you, Senator Akaka.

Senator Akaka. Thank you.

Aloha. I want to welcome all of you here today.

A warm welcome to National Commander Robert T. Reynolds and all the DAV members in the audience.

A special aloha to Carol Minami and Thomas Freitas, who have traveled all the way from my home State of Hawaii.

Will you stand, please? Are you here? Aloha.

[Applause.]

I am very pleased to join all the leaders of the Veterans Affairs' Committees: Chairman Bob Filner and Ranking Member Steve Buyer of the House committee, as well as my colleague Senator Richard Burr, the Senate's ranking member.

As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I will continue to work toward one simple goal: to ensure that veterans receive the highest-quality benefits and services. That is the concept; it is not a difficult one.

When we send our troops to war, we must be prepared to care for them when they return home. Caring for them means providing the best health care and other services. Part of our commitment is to appropriately compensate veterans for their injuries. At this time of war, we simply must ensure that VA is equipped with the resources necessary to carry out these missions now and in the years to come.

Just weeks ago, my majority colleagues on the Senate committee and I recommended that the VA health care account receive a \$4.6 billion increase over fiscal year 2008.

[Applause.]

We must go further than the President's budget. And with DAV's help, I am confident that we will.

I am also very aware of how important it is that

funding gets to VA on time. I will be working with my colleagues to ensure that it happens this year. I remain open to new approaches to guarantee timely funding of VA's discretionary programs, and I look forward to working with DAV and other groups on such proposals.

I know you share my commitment to providing a seamless transition from military to civilian life for the newest generation of veterans. I am proud of the Wounded Warrior provisions we enacted last year as part of the National Defense Authorization Act. I am especially proud of the provision I offered to expand VA health-care eligibility for returning veterans from 2 to 5 years.

My legislation on a comprehensive traumatic brain injury program was also part of that package. VA has a responsibility to be at the forefront of TBI and treatment, and we are working to get VA there.

Assisting VA veterans' families is an essential part of the successful reintegration of new veterans into their communities. Family members are often the primary caregivers for injured veterans, and they face a multitude of wide-ranging needs. DAV is working with some of the top experts in the health-care field and has brought solid, real-world ideas to the Congress. I look forward to continuing to work with you on these issues.

As someone who knows firsthand how valuable the GI Bill

is, we must make sure that the value of educational assistance benefits for veterans keeps pace with the high costs of higher education.

Timely and accurate adjudication of disability claims also remains an issue. Veterans deserve to have their claims addressed fairly and without needless delay.

Finally, I am hopeful that we will soon see action on major bills that have not yet been considered in the Senate. I have been working with my colleagues in the hopes of reaching an agreement to debate these bills, and I really expect that there will be action to complete these bills in the near future.

In closing, I again thank Commander Reynolds and the members of DAV. I applaud you for your long and proud tradition of service and dedication to this great Nation and its veterans, and appreciate your presentation today.

I must apologize, but I have to attend a Members-only intelligence briefing in the Capitol that begins in just a few minutes, so I will be not able to remain with you for your testimony.

I thank you very much for being here. We look to a great future, and we can meet that future working together.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

[Applause.]

The Chairman. Thank you, Senator Akaka.

I would recognize the ranking member of the House committee, Mr. Buyer.

Mr. Buyer. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator Webb, thanks for coming over.

Commander, when the DAV was formed during the aftermath of World War I, your founding members dedicated the organization to helping soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who suffered injuries and illnesses while facing the Nation. And I cannot think of a more laudable mission that you have, and I hope the DAV would never lose focus on serving America's wounded warriors.

The reason I have said that is that when the House Veterans' Affairs Committee repealed the Hartness decision, what they chose to do, on a party-line vote, was to take benefits away from wartime, disabled, indigent and elderly veterans. And it is one of those things that really eats inside of me.

And when I asked the DAV, "What is your position on that?", you see, the whisper that I got back -- because you didn't want to send me a letter -- about the DAV's position on whether you are going to defend wartime, elderly, indigent, disabled veterans was that, "Not all of them are our members."

Well, if the DAV is not going to stand up for all disabled veterans, then whom? I guess it is going to be the

job of the VFW, or we will let AMVETS, we will let the American Legion, we will let others take care of that? No.

My charge to you, Commander -- and I would like to work with you -- is, whether that veteran is a service-connected disabled veteran, which I understand your charter, or others are nonservice-connected disabled, I think disabled veterans in America look to you for leadership. And I want you to be able to stand and defend those of whom are the weakest and the poorest and disabled regardless of whether it is a service-connected or nonservice-connected. Okay?

I also want to welcome you, and I also want to thank you for your service. You not only served our country in the Army, but you continue to serve in the Department of Veterans Affairs. We look forward to your oral testimony. I had an opportunity last night to read your statement.

I also want to recognize the DAV auxiliary and its national commander, Kathryn Wiley. My mother was the Indiana auxiliary president for the American Legion, so I understand what it takes for to you go through the chairs and the level of commitment. And so, congratulations to you.

I would also like to take a moment to recognize and welcome DAV members and fellow Hoosiers from my home State of Indiana. Joining us this afternoon from the DAV Department of Indiana are the DAV National Board of

Directors member Bill Bottom; the State commander, Jim Thureau; the department adjutant, Mike Whelihan; and interim committee legislative director Joseph Carroll.

I am also honored that the DAV national service officer staff from Indianapolis is also well-represented here today: Tony Craig, Don Inns and Deandre Greer.

Gentlemen, I am aware of the tremendous effort that the NSO office puts forward to serving Indiana's disabled veterans and their families. Not only do you put in very long hours, but you also spend a considerable amount of time on the road each year, performing outreach to Indiana's small towns and rural areas. So I am very thankful.

I am especially thankful for the work the DAV national service officers perform in representing veterans in the VA claims process. DAV has a long tradition of being a strong and effective advocate for members and disabled veterans everywhere in the country.

Commander, you and your members have much to be proud of. I am especially impressed with the number of hours DAV members donate in volunteerism. You act as drivers; you spend thousands of hours, driving thousands of miles, taking patients to and from medical appointments at VA hospitals. Your services are invaluable to a number of veterans who would be housebound if not for your efforts. Volunteers are the heart and soul of what veterans service organizations



are all about. I know you know that, Commander.

You are also to be commended for your selfless actions on behalf of other veterans, and I am honored to have served you in my tenure on this committee.

Like you, one of my deepest concerns is that of the America's service-connected disabled veterans have the benefits and services they require to lead independent and full lives. Over the course of the past few years, a number of issues have arisen that have created deep concerns, one of which I earlier had addressed to you.

The President's Commission on Care for America's Wounded Warriors, otherwise known as the Dole-Shalala Commission, and the Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission were tasked with evaluating veterans programs. Of course, the latter one mentioned, the Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission, simply known as the Disability Commission, was fortunate to have one of the esteemed commissioners, a member of the DA legislative staff, serve. Both the Dole-Shalala and the Disability Commissions identified a number of shortcomings with regard to the veterans' benefits, especially for those going through the arduous transition from military disability discharge process to the VA system.

I am honored and eager to make certain that the problems identified by these commissions are rectified as

swiftly as possible. I, along with Senator Richard Burr, the ranking member on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, we both introduced legislation last week that will address a number of the glaring inequities facing America's newest generation of disabled veterans. Our bills are separate, and they only have a few differences.

My bill, the Noble Warrior Act, 5509, would automatically entitle medical retirees to a life-long military retired pay that is not offset against VA compensation. So we don't do these offsets, and we get away from the concurrent receipt. And I introduced that back in 1999. And the Noble Warrior Act also would accomplish -- it accomplishes that, so we get away from the concurrent receipt. The service members would receive pay for their time served and their rank achieved.

The Noble Warrior Act -- there are no phase-ins. There are no confusing acronyms. And we also want to simplify the process. If you are medically retired, you are eligible. No longer would injured service members have to worry about the disability percentage level assigned by a military physical evaluation board.

In other words, what we are trying to do is get DOD out of the evaluation process. So many of you went through two processes. You went through the DOD system, and then you went through the VA system. So if we can get DOD out of the

system and we transition so that you are evaluated by one system, we have sought to streamline the process.

So, not only do we want to streamline the process, what Mr. Burr and I are attempting to do here is we also want to modernize the compensation system. And when we modernize the compensation, we want to take into account the quality of life. And that is exactly one of the resolutions that came from your organization. Because the President's systems don't take into account the compensate-on-quality-of-life issues. So how much longer does it take for an individual to put on a prosthetic? How does it change their life, and shouldn't that be part of the system?

And I can assure you that there will be the naysayers. Commander, I was disheartened when at first, right out of the box, you hadn't even read the legislation and a spokesman for DAV begins to say, "Oh, I don't know about that. Here are some of our concerns." You haven't even read it yet, and you are saying, "Here are our concerns."

When you go by and you go down this, you will see that the contents of our legislation coincide with many of your resolutions that also passed. Senator Burr and I don't make this stuff up. We take the best of your recommendations, we took the best of several commissions, and we put in our own insights, and we wanted to modernize this system to take

care of our veterans.

And I recall -- let me just say this, and I will close -- I recall what it was like when I changed the pay tables. When I changed the military pay tables, you would have thought that they were delivered by Moses, that you could never change the pay tables. You only changed the pay tables to provide retention to the mid-level NCOs and officer corps. And we have had a benefit by that.

So when it comes to the compensation, to modernize the compensation system, we in Congress recognize we want a seamless process, we want to bring efficiencies, we want to modernize it. And in the end, this compensation system is going to cost the Government more money but so be it, because we want to modernize this system and take care of soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines. And that is our solemn responsibility.

I yield back.

The Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Buyer.

Senator Burr, the ranking member on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Senator Burr. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Steve, Senator Webb, our colleague, thank you for your passion for the representation that you provide for veterans.

Commander Reynolds, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you

personally for your willingness to be here today. It is a privilege to be in the presence of those who have offered so much in defense of America. The members of the Disabled American Veterans have sacrificed the health of body and of mind for our freedoms. For that, we are forever grateful to you.

Many of you have traveled great distances to carry on the tradition of participating in these joint hearings each year. Your presence here today is evidence of your commitment, your strong commitment to America's veterans. I welcome all of you.

And I want to take the opportunity to extend a very special welcome to those members from North Carolina. I have worn my Tar Heel tie today. And if I could be so bold, could I ask those from North Carolina to stand up and be recognized?

[Applause.]

I thank my friends from North Carolina, but I truly do thank all of you for your willingness to be here.

I was reminded recently, as recently as a day or two ago, what day-to-day work must be like when I intervened last week for an 82-year-old disabled veteran from Franklin County, North Carolina, named Birdie Walker to get his proper pension that he was due.

Now, how did all of a sudden I get involved in an

82-year-old disabled vet's pension? I got word that they were going to sell his house on the courthouse steps the next day, that because they had made a mistake in what he was supposed to get in pension, they were going to sell his house, of an 82-year-old disabled veteran, and his family was going to be left out in the cold.

This bit of difference, little bit of difference, helped Birdie and his family avoid the impending foreclosure on that house. I know you all do that kind of thing every day, every day of the week. So I want you to know how grateful we are for the services you provide.

I also want to welcome Kathryn Wiley. Thank you for your service.

Commander Reynolds, it is good to have you here. And I thank you for what you do and, more importantly, for your testimony today.

I think it is safe to say -- and I can only speak for myself -- I take no bigger obligation than the responsibilities I have on this committee to make sure that every veteran, regardless of where they are or who they are, is given every promise that this country made. We may have differences of opinion amongst the committees. We may have differences of opinion between the Congress and the VSOs. Truly, every night when I go to bed I understand the obligation that I have.

It was Thomas Jefferson years ago that said, "I am not an advocate of frequent changes in laws and constitutions, but laws and institutions must advance to keep pace with the progress of the human mind." I share that with you because I think our Founding Fathers were absolutely brilliant. They thought of things over 200 years ago that we have yet to run into that the system that they created will take care of. Today we might not have answers because we haven't got the problem yet.

But I am always reminded of what Jefferson said, "not an advocate of frequent changes in laws and constitutions, but laws and institutions must advance to keep pace with the progress of the human mind." If one looks at the way we treat an amputee from World War II and only accepts that that is the way we are going to treat him today, quite frankly, we have let that veteran down. Jefferson reminded all of us who serve up here that we have to look at how society changes, the effects technology has on it, the miracle of medicine and what it can do in healing diseases today that 20 years ago we had no hope, no choice.

I can be criticized for a lot of things, but willingness to change a system to make it better -- well, I accept the criticism. I hope that I challenge you every day that I am here to criticize me if it is because I am trying to change something to provide a better benefit for the

veterans, not just in the future, but those of you who are in this room today. Because I believe that is the charge that our Founding Fathers gave us, was to recognize the change, recognize the possibility and facilitate the changes in legislation that led to it.

I have never seen the American people comfortable with change, and I don't think in my lifetime or in the future they ever will be. But the reality is, everybody in this room knows where we would be if, in fact, we didn't change, we didn't incorporate technology, we didn't strive for something better than where we are at today.

I am committed to work with each and every one of you, with all the VSOs, to make sure that the system of the future is one that accommodates everybody. But to ignore that a system has to change would be to disregard our Founding Fathers' wise wisdom to us. For that, I am willing to take them and commit to remembering their words.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

[Applause.]

The Chairman. I thank you, Senator Burr. And thank you for your endorsement of your colleague, Senator Obama.

It is a joke. It is a joke. Only Webb is laughing.

Let me again thank you all for being here. And I said earlier you have come at a great time. Several weeks ago -- well, let me set the context of our budget in which you are



here, when we are now considering next fiscal year.

In the current year, we were able to raise the health-care budget for our veterans over \$13 billion. That is a 30 percent increase -- unprecedented in the history of the VA. And for the first time as a Congress, we, in fact, exceeded the recommendations of the Independent Budget, of which the DAV worked so hard on and which we are so appreciative of. So we start off much better than we were just a year ago. I am not sure we can sustain that rate, but we are going to look at this budget as our Bible.

Now, the President submitted a budget recommendation a few weeks ago. His was not worthy of the sacrifice of our veterans.

[Applause.]

For the, I don't know, seventh or eighth time in a row, the President recommended increases in enrollment fees for certain veterans and a doubling of the pharmacy copayments. We have not accepted that for the last 7 years, and we are not going to accept it again this year, I will tell you.

[Applause.]

And of course that brings in some revenue that we have to figure out, but it is also estimated that several hundred thousand veterans would not be able to afford the new fees and would leave the system, thus saving us a great deal of money. Wow, what a great idea, especially at a time of war,

kicking out veterans from the VA system. We will not allow that to occur. We just simply will not allow that to occur.

In addition, the President suggested an increase in the health-care budget that just about covered inflation but cut the budget in every other area, such as research or construction. Again, we are going to provide for a more-than-inflationary increase, and we are going to restore those cuts that he made to the other parts of the budget. I assure you that we are going to do that.

[Applause.]

So the majority of this -- actually, both the Republicans and Democrats made recommendations about the budget, and both recommendations met and exceeded the Independent Budget. So we have a good chance for doing that for the second straight year, I assure you, because we take this very seriously.

[Applause.]

And the budget is the framework in which we have to provide oversight, and we depend on you and your membership to allow us to know what is going on in the VAs that you have contact with every day.

Now, we have a set of priorities in the coming year that I think match, Commander, your recommendations to a great degree -- no accident, because we have been hearing and reading your recommendations for a long time.

I think, first and foremost -- and I am so happy that Senator Webb is here to introduce you, Commander, because Senator Webb is the leader on the issue that we have to have a GI Bill for the 21st century. We have to have a GI Bill.

[Applause.]

And Senator Webb has written the major legislation which brings up the educational benefits to something that makes sense for the tuition and the cost of living in today's world. It brings up the housing program so housing values and refinancing costs and values meet the reality of today's world.

And, maybe most important, it says that those active-duty Reserve and Guard units who are doing half of the fighting in Iraq will have access to the same benefits. The Reserve and Guard units will have access, as do our active duty.

[Applause.]

So, Senator Webb, we look forward to working with you on that. We want to also break through this incredible and really, I think, reprehensible backlog in disability claims. I mean, we are closing on 700,000 right now. People have, I know in this room, have waited years, maybe decades, for some of the resolution. People have been fighting the VA for those benefits so long they think VA means "veterans' adversary" instead of "veterans' advocate." We need to be

the veterans' advocate.

And we have hired and provided a budget for hundreds and hundreds of new claims workers, but that is going to take years before that works its way down. I think we need a real radical approach to cutting that backlog down. I think we need, for example, -- and I hate to use the IRS as a model. But, you know, the IRS was a pretty dysfunctional agency 20 years ago, but they reformed. And when you file your taxes, your 1040, today and have a refund coming, you will get the check in 3 weeks. Why can't -- but it is subject to audit. If your claim was put in with a medical documentation and aided by a certified veterans service officer, why not accept it, subject to audit?

[Applause.]

I think we could get those claims down pretty quick.

And if you are a Vietnam vet -- and how many here are Vietnam vets? Wow. We owe you an incredible thank-you, by the way. We have, as a society --

[Applause.]

We did not give you the honor and dignity in the main when you came back. Many of us who opposed that war did you wrong. We confused the war and the warrior.

[Applause.]

And we have 200,000 of your comrades on the street, homeless. We have a situation where the suicides of

veterans has reached the number of killed in the war originally, over 58,000. So we did something wrong, and we owe you a lot.

And all your Agent Orange claims -- I don't care whether your boots were on the ground or your ship was off to sea or your airplane was in the sky, we should grant those Agent Orange claims. We should grant those claims.

[Applause.]

So we are going to cut through that, I hope.

And lastly, as I think was mentioned, the VA can't function when a budget is 5 months late. We argue here, the Senate has a number, the House has a number, Republicans have a number, Democrats have a number. That doesn't serve you.

There has been a proposal for mandatory or assured funding.

[Applause.]

There are some new proposals for so-called "forward funding" that will get the budget there on time. We have got to do this for all of you. We have got to give you the predictability.

[Applause.]

So those are our -- after we get this, I hope before even, the budget, but once we get the Independent Budget enacted, we are going to go after the GI Bill, we are going

to go after the claims backlog, and we are going to deal with the funding mechanisms. I think we owe that to you.

The DAV has taken the lead on all these, and we welcome you here today. Commander, we welcome you.

And, Senator Webb, thank you for being here and for --

[Applause.]

I recognize the Senator from Virginia to introduce your commander.

[The statement of the Chairman appears on p. ]

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Senator Webb. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

First of all, I would like to express my appreciation to you and Chairman Akaka for doing these joint veterans groups hearings again. It is a process that was ongoing while I was a committee counselor over here many years ago. It is not only an excellent chance for Members to meet the larger body of these veterans organizations, as has often been said, it is a chance for our people to get out and make their views known to staff on the Hill here and other places where, quite frankly, we don't see enough veterans and we don't hear enough of the experiences.

I am really privileged to be able to introduce our national commander, our Disabled American Veterans national commander. And I am so for three different reasons. The first is that this is a splendid organization. I have been a member of the Disabled American Veterans since I left the Marine Corps.

[Applause.]

In fact, somewhere out there, I think over in the Department of Labor, there is a former NSO named Ron Drott, who was working at the regional office in Washington, D.C., and grabbed me when I was walking in, trying to file a veterans claim in 1972, couldn't figure out how to do all this stuff, he showed me how to do it and signed me up. And

then when Commander Reynolds visited me last week, they presented me a card that said, "DAV member since 1973." And I said, no, that was, like, July 1972. But knowing Ron Drott, it probably took him a few months to walk that piece of paper across the DAV office.

[Laughter.]

So I will accept 1973, at this point.

This is an organization whose institutional memory with respect to the well-being of our veterans is unsurpassed, and its NSO programs, going back to World War II, are second to none. That is legislative programs, the thoughtfulness that goes into them, the way that they manage their people. I have been so impressed with the Disabled American Veterans from the time that I was working over here as a committee counsel. And we shouldn't forget, obviously, the people that they serve.

You know, we talk a lot about courage. And there is different kinds of courage. We can talk about battlefield courage; we can talk about moral courage. I think Senator Burr was referring to a good bit of that when he talked about the Jeffersonian principles and that sort of thing. But there is a phenomenon that I have come to call in my lifetime "daily courage."

And I will give you an example. There is an individual, actually in Troutman, North Carolina, Senator



Burr, who served under me in Vietnam, a tremendous Marine who is now a triple amputee, Dale Wilson. And if you want to know courage, when you watch Dale Wilson get up every morning and take 15 minutes to put his prostheses on and watch him go out without complaint and raise a family and have a job and make a lifetime and never once look back in anger, that is daily courage. And you have a roomful of people with daily courage here today.

[Applause.]

And the second reason that I feel so privileged to do this is it is a bit of a return. I spent 4 years over here, 1977 to 1981. I think I was the first Vietnam veteran to serve as a full committee counsel in the Congress. And we had a lot of hearings down the hallway and also in this room. Not so much from having the perspective of having been a Congressman, which I wasn't, but from the perspective of having been the next tier back, trying to advise my Member and making sure that they remembered certain things and those sorts of things. So a lot of memories come back when I come over here.

And the third reason, quite obviously, is I have the pleasure of introducing a true leader, someone who has served our country well and someone who is serving Disabled American Veterans this year at the highest level with great esteem.

Robert Reynolds is a soldier, a true soldier. He enlisted in the Army out of high school. Then he became an airborne infantry soldier, the 82nd Airborne. Went to jungle expert school, went to French commando school, was deployed and then was with the Army Special Forces when he was involved in an accident in a parachute environment. So he then, like many here, learned what it was like to be inside a hospital off and on for a couple of years, and was discharged from the Army for medical reasons.

He also is a life member of the same DAV chapter that I belong to. I can remember many, many years ago, after I left the Marine Corps, trying to transition back into civilian life, well, I would go to the DAV meetings and talk to people who had served in World War II and talk about how we could help people. And so it is really, sort of, a full circle here to be introducing someone from Chapter 10 in Arlington, Virginia, which I joined so many years ago.

And finally, with respect to Commander Reynolds, this is an individual who, after he left the military, decided to spend the rest of his professional life helping our veterans, working as a professional in the Department of Veterans Affairs.

So I am very pleased to have had this opportunity to introduce Commander Reynolds, and he has waited a long time to be able to give his testimony. And I will turn it over

to him.

[Applause.]

**STATEMENT OF MR. ROBERT T. REYNOLDS, NATIONAL  
COMMANDER, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS**

Mr. Reynolds. Thank you, Senator Webb, for that introduction, and thank you for your leadership to create A GI Bill for the 21st Century.

Messrs. Chairmen, I want to personally thank you for this opportunity to appear before you and your committees.

Please allow me to introduce those seated at the table with me, as well as some of our distinguished guests: National Adjutant Art Wilson; Executive Directors Rick Patterson and Dave Gorman; Service Director Randy Reese; Legislative Director Joe Violante; Voluntary Services Director Ed Hartman; Auxiliary National Commander Kathryn Wiley of Washington; Auxiliary National Adjutant Maria Tedrow; DAV Senior Vice Commander Ray Dempsey of Illinois; Junior Vice Commanders Bobby Vieira of Texas, Wally Tyson of North Carolina, Don Samuels of Tennessee and Larry Polzin of California; National Judge Advocate Mike Dobmeier of North Dakota; past National Commander and Chairman of the Board of Directors Brad Barton of Oregon; Chaplain Charles Edwards; and National Chief of Staff Dave Tannenbaum. Let me also introduce my wife, Jennifer, and my son, R.J.

[Applause.]

I will ask the DAV National Executive Committee to please stand and be recognized.

[Applause.]

May I ask the members of the National Legislative Interim Committee to please stand?

[Applause.]

I also would like to recognize the entire DAV delegation from Virginia.

[Applause.]

Messrs. Chairmen and members of the Veterans' Affairs Committees, on behalf of the more than 1.5 million members of the Disabled American Veterans and its auxiliary, I am honored to appear before you today to discuss the major concerns of our Nation's wartime disabled veterans and their families.

Senator Akaka and Congressman Filner, welcome back, both of you, as Chairmen of your respective Veterans' Affairs Committees.

[Applause.]

Senator Burr, congratulations on your selection as ranking member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee.

And welcome back, Ranking Member Buyer.

[Applause.]

To those returning and new members of the committees,

we wish all of you Godspeed in your efforts on behalf of our Nation's disabled veterans, their dependents and survivors.

Messrs. Chairmen, in my remarks today I will briefly touch on a number of important topics that my written statement covers in more detail. I ask that my written testimony be made a part of the record. I welcome any questions or comments from members of the committee, and my staff is available to respond.

For 6 years now, America's brave young men and women have been in harm's way in Iraq and Afghanistan. Each day, new casualties return needing medical care and rehabilitation and a chance at a rewarding and productive life. We, as a Nation, owe them all we can to make sure their services and sacrifices are not ignored or undervalued.

Our great Nation can no longer excuse its failure to provide veterans with benefits and services they rightfully deserve by saying it cannot afford to fully honor its promises. This country, the richest nation in the world, has the means to meet those obligations.

[Applause.]

Now our Nation, a nation at war, must demonstrate it has the will to meet the needs of both returning veterans and older veterans. If our Government can call upon them to defend our freedoms, it should provide for the needs of

veterans when they need it most.

[Applause.]

Messrs. Chairmen, I would like to extend our thanks to the leadership of this Congress for their commitment to ensuring the Department of Veterans Affairs has a budget that is sufficient to meet the needs of disabled veterans, their families and survivors. The leadership promised that veterans would be a priority in the 110th Congress, and they have kept that promise. We are hopeful that commitment to veterans will continue in the future.

DAV would also like to thank President Bush for asking Congress for the \$3.7 billion in emergency funding for VA above the initial request. We believe the veterans health-care system is certainly worth the investment. The VA provides top-quality, cost-effective care to the most deserving group of Americans. The long-term viability of the veterans health-care system also depends on sufficient, timely and predictable funding. Veterans benefits and health care must be a top priority for our Government, as they are a continuing cost of our national defense.

[Applause.]

A core mission of the VA is providing benefits to relieve the economic effects of disability upon veterans and their families. Therefore, it is imperative that the VA improve the timeliness and accuracy of the claims

adjudication system.

Messrs. Chairmen, as a VA employee myself, I can tell you that there are thousands and thousands of dedicated, hard-working people in the Department, from the Secretary's office on down, who go to work every day eager to serve our Nation's veterans. And all they need are the tools and resources to do the best possible job they can for our veterans.

Messrs. Chairmen, the major policy positions of the DAV address our Nation's moral obligation toward our disabled veterans and their families. Our current mandates cover a broad range of programs. As we will have the opportunity to more fully address those resolutions during hearings before your committees and with your staffs, I will only briefly comment on a few of them at this time.

Support additional increase in grants for automobiles and special adaptive housing, and provide an automatic annual increase based on the cost of living. Increase the face value of Service-Disabled Veterans Insurance. Authorize VA to revise its premium schedule to reflect current mortality tables. Extend eligibility for Veterans' Mortgage Life Insurance to service-connected veterans rated permanently and totally disabled. And support legislation for full concurrent receipt of military longevity retirement pay and VA disability compensation for all affected

veterans.

We also ask support for legislation to authorize minting of coins to help fund the American Veterans Disabled for Life memorial. H.R. 634 has passed the House, and S. 2119 has been introduced in the Senate. I encourage you to support this measure and its long-overdue passage.

[Applause.]

As you can see, the DAV's work for disabled veterans and their families continues to involve many issues and many challenges. When it comes to justice for disabled veterans, we cannot be timid in our advocacy, and we hope that you will not be timid in your advocacy on behalf of disabled veterans either.

Therefore, we call upon the members of these committees, as our advocates in Congress, to help us educate your colleagues about the priorities of disabled veterans. We call upon to you stand up for veterans.

Since our inception, the DAV has sought to protect the interests of all disabled veterans. The purpose our founders set for themselves in 1920 remains the same today: building better lives for America's disabled veterans and their families.

Messrs. Chairmen, I am very proud of what the DAV stands for and what we have accomplished in our 88-year history. Our nationwide corps of professionally trained



service officers and transition service officers are the best in the business. All our NSOs and TSOs are wartime service-connected disabled veterans. Last year alone, our NSOs counseled, free of charge, over 156,000 veterans and their families in their claims for VA benefits, obtaining for them more than \$3 billion in new and retroactive benefits.

And in response to the large number of severely disabled military members being treated at Walter Reed and Brooke Army Medical Center and Bethesda Naval Medical Center, DAV has staffed offices to provide assistance to the men and women being treated at those facilities.

Our Mobile Service Office program puts our NSOs on the road to assist veterans where they live -- in rural communities, inner cities and areas devastated by natural disasters. These specially equipped offices on wheels were deployed by DAV to the gulf coast regions hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina and Rita and to the tornado-destroyed town of Greensboro, Kansas. These mobile offices allowed the DAV to provide much-needed assistance directly to displaced disabled veterans and their families.

[Applause.]

In addition to those professional services, the DAV and its auxiliary have more than 16,000 volunteers in VA hospitals and clinics. Last year, they provided almost 2.5

million hours of free essential services to VA patients. And last year, we launched the Local Veterans Assistance Program, which provides volunteers even more opportunities to assist veterans and their dependents in their communities.

DAV is constantly looking for ways to recruit and engage new members and volunteers. We saw the need to create a program for those who want to do something for veterans and their families but could not because they were too far from a VA facility.

In order to ensure the future of a viable volunteer program, DAV sought to reward a new generation of VA volunteers. In 2000, we created the National Commander's Youth Volunteer Scholarship Program to honor outstanding young volunteers who participate in the VA volunteer service program. In 2003, in remembrance of former VA Secretary and former DAV Executive Director Jesse Brown, this scholarship program was renamed in his honor. Since its inception, DAV has awarded almost 90 scholarships, totaling \$300,000.

Last year, the DAV national organization and our departments and chapters donated 164 vans to VA, free of charge, as part of our nationwide transportation network. Since we began this free transportation program, the DAV has purchased and then donated more than 2,100 vans to the VA, at a cost of \$43 million. Since 1987, our vans and

volunteer drivers have provided rides to more than 11 million veterans, travelling more than 416 million miles.

[Applause.]

This program serves disabled veterans in every State, in every congressional district in the country. And for all they do to serve our veterans and their communities, these magnificent volunteers are a source of pride and inspiration for us all. And I want to acknowledge their commitment and compassion to our Nation's veterans. Thank you all very much.

[Applause.]

Messrs. Chairmen, this completes my testimony. Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to share our record of service to veterans and our country and to discuss our agenda and our concerns for the 110th Congress.

Thank you also for all that your committees have done and for all that you will do for veterans in the future. May God bless America's brave young men and women who have been placed in harm's way in the fight against terrorism.

Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

[The statement of Mr. Reynolds appears on p. ]

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The Chairman. Thank you, Commander. Thank you very much.

I want to call first on the gentleman from Minnesota, Mr. Walz, who, I must tell you, is the highest-elected enlisted man ever to serve in Congress.

United States Army Command Sergeant Major Tim Walz.

[Applause.]

Mr. Walz. Thank you.

Thank you to the Chairman and the ranking member.

Commander Reynolds, thank you so much for your very articulate description of the issues that we need to work on together to fulfill our promises.

Thank you to Auxiliary Commander Wiley for all you do.

I believe we do have some Minnesotans out there. I believe our Minnesota commander, Bill Wroolie, is out there.

Are you out there, Bill?

Well, I am going to take a transplanted Minnesotan then, one that we are claiming as our own even though he moved to Florida for warmer climates, past commander Jim Sursely, a Minnesotan. So thank you.

[Applause.]

And to each of you, I can't tell you how I love this day on Capitol Hill more than any other. To see you all in this room and to see you on Capitol Hill, I said it is a

very humbling experience to stand with you and a privilege, as Senator Burr said, a privilege just to hear you. It is also, for me, very empowering. And I am filled for pride for this Nation, to see what this Nation is made of, to see the heart and soul of what people are willing to do to keep this Nation free.

So I thank you all for travelling so many miles and, for many of you, for fighting these fights over and over and over again. And trust me, there will be a day when we will no longer make our veterans come to the Hill to beg for what is owed to them. They will come here and we will say thank you.

[Applause.]

As we are talking about and trying to come to -- trying to figure out budgets and discuss up here, I do think it is really critical for everyone to understand the commitment that comes from this committee to fulfilling what is right for our veterans is unwavering. We may have differences on the delivery; we may have differences of opinion. But I can tell you that it is one that we share that commitment and know that we must deliver. Everyone in this room knows that it is a moral responsibility. We also know that it is a national security responsibility.

I am a schoolteacher by training and spent my whole life, up until last year, doing that, and knowing that our

best and brightest, they need to know they can join our armed services. They need to know that they can defend this Nation, as each of you did. And that is the reason that that commitment is very clear up here.

And we will and we have made progress, but I thank each of you for being here, because what I would ask today and what I would have the Commander and everyone here do is make sure you hold our feet to the fire. Make sure that you have -- everyone wants to stand in front of you and give the speeches. Who is going to stand behind you when you need it? And that is what you have been asking for, that is what you have been working for. And, in this Congress, we have delivered. We delivered last year on some of those promises. But we have a long way to go.

So there are just a couple of things -- and I would like to say, I am, too, pleased that you are back here testifying, but I find it kind of ironic that it is thanks to you that we even have a democracy that we can be up here and you can testify. So that is long overdue.

[Applause.]

But there are a couple of things, though, I would like to say. And when we are doing the budgeting, and we are getting there, the Independent Budget -- and you saw the Chairman and you see the commitment up here to this. This is a document that I think the DAV should take great pride

in. This is a document that you have been producing now for over 22 years. This is a document that a lot of thought went into. This is a nonpartisan document that simply gives us a road map on how to care for our veterans. And we take this incredibly seriously.

And as I was talking about today, I spent a lot of years, of course, as an enlisted soldier. I remember asking all those young troops if they were pulling their maintenance on their vehicles. And they would of course always say, "Oh, yeah, we are doing all the maintenance we can." I would say, "Where is your Dash 10 manual?" Not one smudge in it. You never opened the dang thing.

[Laughter].

And I would tell you -- I would go to your congressional office, ask them if they can produce this document. If they can't pull it out and tell you some of the things that is in here, it makes me question how committed they are to listening to your side of the story, how committed they are to making sure that you get it done.

[Applause.]

There are a couple of things in here that I would say -- and I thank you and I thank those who are out there committed. When Senator Dole sat in this room and testified with Donna Shalala on the Dole-Shalala Commission, he made it very clear to us, he said, "Regardless of what your

opinion is about anything else, you have spent billions of dollars putting them in harm's way. You spend what is necessary to get them out." And he made it very simple. He said, "Do what you need to do."

[Applause.]

Now, I would argue, there are going to be those that are going to make the argument -- and it is a legitimate argument to make; it is fine to talk about it -- they are going to say it is too expensive. Now, that argument may actually hold up had we not been so willing to spend billions elsewhere without batting an eye. That might have been an argument.

[Applause.]

I look at this, and I want to tell you something that all of us -- and this is one that I think we should think long and hard about, how this stuff happens. There are two things I want to say that, just, I find very appalling.

One in here, you have a suggestion, it is very small -- it is not the big issues we know we need to tackle. And we do, we need to tackle mandatory funding. We need to tackle a new GI Bill that Senator Webb and Representative Herseth Sandlin have worked so hard on. We need to get those things. But there are just little things in here that we have to change the culture on how we view this delivery of these system.



One is this idea of rounding down compensations to balance a budget. Could anything be more insulting to our veterans than to round down 12 cents?

[Applause.]

I don't know this answer for a fact, but I will guarantee you I am going to have my staff find out about this. I ask you if Halliburton is getting rounded down on their contracts, and I will see if they are.

[Laughter.]

And it is a valid question, because it is all about how we prioritize. It is all about how we ask for how we are going to deliver for our veterans. So it is that one.

And then I ask you this: If you want to see where this place can get things done, we had an economic stimulus package that took less than 3 weeks to move all the way from the President's suggestion through the Senate, through the House, to conference and be sent out. But I think there was something very interesting about that that maybe didn't get noted. It took an amendment in the conference committee to add disabled veterans to those checks. It took an amendment to get that in.

Why were we not thinking of the disabled veterans first when we did a stimulus package? Why was it an afterthought? And the question bothers me because I think it comes to the heart of this: We have tough decisions to make. We have

things that we have to deliver. But one thing is going to remain constant. We are going to come and go; campaign promises are going to come and go. This Nation's wounded warriors are always going to be here. And the other thing that I am happy is a constant is the DAV will always be there to fight for them. So thank you for doing that.

I yield back.

[Applause.]

The Chairman. Thank you.

You see why we love our sergeant major.

The gentleman from New York, Mr. Hall, is the Chairman of our Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs.

RPTS CASWELL

DCMN NORMAN.

Mr. Hall. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I thank you all, and Mr. Walz.

Before I get on to my remarks, I wanted to let you all know that I not only wrote a letter to the Speaker in January asking for disabled veterans to be included in the stimulus package before it went to the Senate, but I asked for those who were on the waiting list of 600, 700, however many hundred thousand it is, to be able to get those checks.

But, you know, they say there are a couple of things you don't want to see made. One of them is sausage and the other is legislation. So I guess you throw a lot of things in there and you are not really sure what comes out until you get it.

I want to thank all of you for being here, especially Members from New York and others who I had breakfast with before and members of DAV across the country. All the members of this committee greatly appreciate the work of DAV and your countless and continuous efforts on behalf of veterans.

Without your work, many of our veterans would still be waiting for a disability claim to be processed, or might have decided never to have faced the bureaucracy of VA. While members of this committee have our differences on

other issues, I will concur with my colleagues and say that I am proud that we are able to come together in a bipartisan fashion and work to improve the lives of veterans.

I agree with DAV's concerns about timely funding in the VA and hope that we can make health care funding mandatory. Along those lines I am bringing with me 5,000 petitions that were presented to me at a town hall meeting in my district, the 19th District of New York, by veterans and others supporting their call for mandatory funding of VA health care. I told them I would bring these to Washington and present them to the committee. I am doing that.

I am also, as Chair, I am honored to be a freshman new Member of the House and chair anything, but I am one of three freshmen who is chairing a subcommittee and the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs is working on a number of proposals to reduce the waiting time -- which in recent weeks has gone up from 177 days for a claim to be processed, to 183 days last I heard -- which is moving in the wrong direction. We need to be moving down and shorten the time.

As the Chairman said, there are a number of ideas, ways to do that. Some big sweeping changes that we may be looking at; others, smaller changes that would -- sort of the low-hanging fruit, as you might call it, like, for instance, allowing the surviving spouse or a child of a

veteran who dies during the appeals process to pick up that claim at that point rather than having to go back to square one and start it all over again. Requiring the CAVC to rule on all aspects of the claim the first time they see it, rather than remanding it for the first thing and remanding it for the second thing and so on, and giving you that hamster-wheel effect that I have heard so aptly described.

There are a lot of little changes that can be made that hopefully will cut off a week here, a month there, a few days there, in the time that a veteran has to wait.

Knowing that I come from private -- before I was a small businessman, I was elected a couple of times, local and county office, but mainly I have been a musician and a small businessman, small record company publisher, with my own health care plan that my wife and I are the only employees are on. So we bought our own private policy and had a card that we could go into the local -- and this is a lot of Americans, those fortunate enough to have health insurance, whether it's from your employer or not -- I could take my insurance card and go to the emergency room, and they would run in the back and photocopy it, call the 800 number, and, 5 minutes later, they could tell me if I am covered or not.

I want to make sure that we can cover our veterans the same way, so that they get the same kind of service that

those of us in the private sector have come to expect.

I am interested in your statement about realistically increasing disability compensation rates for disabled veterans and whether DAV would prefer to see ratings payments increased in relation to different body systems or prefer to see a quality-of-life payment, as recommended by the Veterans Disability Claims Report. Any comments along those lines we would be grateful for.

Again, thank you all for your service and for being here today.

I yield back.

The Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Hall.

Mr. Boozman, the gentleman from Arkansas.

Mr. Boozman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Again, thank you all for your service. Thank you for taking the time to be up here.

It is so important for you to come up, as everyone has alluded to, you know, visiting with your Congressman and telling them how important these things are to you. The Veterans' Affairs Committee works hard to try to push things forward, but the most important part of that pushing forward is you all. We really appreciate your efforts and we appreciate your service to our country.

Thank you, Commander Reynolds, for all you are doing and for your guys in Washington. They do a great job and

are always very, very helpful as the issues comes up.

Let me ask you one thing. I met with my guys earlier -- the ability for the lawyers, you know, to be involved in the claims cases; can you discuss that for me a little bit, or one of your guys, as to your position, and why or why not?

Mr. Violante. Mr. Boozman, I would be happy to respond to that.

DAV opposes veterans having to pay attorneys or agents a fee to obtain their benefits. More and more, law firms are now coming on board with services on a pro bono basis, and we certainly support those attorneys who are willing to help veterans for free.

We object to an individual having a stake in what the veteran receives from that claims process, and we do not believe that veterans should have to pay for those benefits.

Mr. Boozman. Also, you know, we worked hard to try to increase the mileage. We were able to do that a little bit, and hopefully that is a foot in the door so we can continue to push some things.

Tell me about, though, we increased the mileage, and then we have got this other fee that has been increased where, you know, when it all balances out, there is just not much there. Which was a surprise, I think, to most Members of Congress.

I am on the committee, I am the Ranking Member on the subcommittee. Again, tell us a little bit about that.

Mr. Violante. My understanding is that the law requires VA to increase the deductible by the same percentage as an increase in the mileage rate, so they are required to do that. We would certainly ask that the members of this committee remove that deductible from that fee.

Mr. Boozman. Good. That is very helpful. Again, I was surprised that it really did. When you start doing the arithmetic to that, you know, there is not much gain, which I think was a little bit surprising to all of us.

So, that is really all I have got. Like I said, I appreciate your service, I appreciate you ladies in the Auxiliary, all that you do, I told a group this morning that I was with a group a couple of years ago, and I was telling the group how the backbone of that organization was the Auxiliary.

As I was driving home, my wife punched me -- we started dating when we were seniors in high school -- and said they are not only the backbone, but they are the brains.

The other thing is, you know, again, working with Ms. Herseth-Sandlin as the Chairman -- I am the Ranking Member and she is the Chairman -- and through her leadership and working hard, we really are trying to get some of these --



you know, there are different things in place in government that basically say that, you know, that there is an encouragement to hire disabled vets. As we know, the encouragement is "may" instead of "shall" and we have worked really hard to try to push that out a little further.

That is a commitment that I will make, and I know that she makes, so that we can go ahead and increase opportunities in the future. We are trying to get, you know, the agencies are on board, we are actually trying to get -- I have got a bill that actually puts Congress to the same standard. So hopefully we can get some of those things done.

But, again, thank you very much for being here, and, most of all, thank you so much for your service to our country.

The Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Boozman.

Mr. Buyer, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. Buyer. Thank you very much. I would like to take a moment to recognize some members of the staff. You had an opportunity to hear from the sergeant major, which is an excellent addition to the Veterans' Affairs Committee.

I, in the first Gulf War as a young captain, I will never forget the sergeant major for the theater army, Joe Oyler. I was impressed so much by him when he retired, I hired him, and he works for me in Monticello. It's a real

joy to walk in and, you know, sort of say, good morning, Sergeant Major; good afternoon, Sergeant Major. He is just a remarkable individual.

I want you to know that we also have two members on the Republican staff of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee. One is no longer with us. His name is Jeff Philips, and Jeff did a lot of work on the disability issues, and Jeff was promoted to brigadier general and is now on Active Duty in the Pentagon. So that is why he is no longer sitting back here.

The other individual I would like to introduce, many of you recognize this face, and that is Brian Lawrence, because of a lot of years that he dedicated -- let me come back to Brian in a second.

The other gentleman I would like to introduce to you is Jim Lariviere. Jim is a staff director on the Republican side, and he is a Marine Reserve colonel. As a young lieutenant, he put his boots on the beach and lost a lot of buddies in Lebanon, and is also a veteran of Afghanistan. He has been selected for promotion to brigadier general of the United States Marine Corps.

Now, the reason Brian is no longer with you is one in particular; and that is, as Congress, we created the Disability Commission. One of the individuals that was working with Duncan Hunter to create this Disability

Commission is -- I am going to go back. I feel that it is time to modernize our disability and compensation systems.

Your resolutions concur with that. I know it is scary and it is frightening; and how are we going to do this and make sure there is equity and everyone is taken care of? There is nothing easy about doing this. It is hard and it is difficult and it is challenging.

This town invests more time and money and effort to break and stop things than to correct and make and build things.

So please enjoin with the committee, because I think it is time that we modernize this system.

So in order to do this, to take the very best recommendations from the Disability Commission -- I never anticipated that the President would then have the Dole-Shalala Commission, but they also added some recommendations -- and we can take the best of everything out here, a lot of great minds. General Scott, this is a tremendous work product that they put together. And in order to build the legislation to make this a reality, I needed intellectual horsepower.

So, Mr. Gorman, that is why I took him from you, okay. I took him from you, and I know you are not happy with me that I did that, but I needed the intellectual horsepower to be able to draft this legislation; is that all right?

Mr. Gorman. Will you give him back to us if it is not okay?

It is perfectly fine, Mr. Buyer. As a matter of fact, we are very pleased to see Brian sitting there. I think Brian brings with him the philosophy, as well as the mentality, not only as a disabled veteran who went through the system, but one who worked for DAV for a number of years and understands the day-to-day issues that confront disabled veterans, the complexity of the VA and how the system probably needs to be changed. And it needs to be changed in a very thoughtful, thought-out intellectual way, as you say.

Mr. Buyer. And that is exactly how we want to approach this. Not only does Senator Burr have some ideas, I have got some ideas. I am quite certain Mr. Filner has ideas. Mr. Akaka, I am sure, has some ideas.

But one thing I am most certain of is I am impatient now, because of not only what you had to go through, through these duplicative systems, you know the challenges and frustrations that you had. I know you don't want that to be shifted to this generation of America's heroes and warriors.

So I am growing impatient, and I want to be able to move out, I want to be able to move out smartly. I want you to be able to engage with us, and I want to do it right.

I am the first to say to you, Commander, I do not have the cornerstone on intellect here. But, collectively, all

of us do, and that is what I want to be able to do here. Hopefully this year we can begin to look at those proposals and pound them out.

Mr. Filner and I have had some really good productive conversations. We have agreed that whenever we can put points on the board, we will put points on the board and we are going to work together to do that.

I know that some advocate a more "comprehensive" approach. However we do this, if we do this and be patient-centric -- and that was my counsel when I met with Donna Shalala and Bob Dole -- is that whatever you do here, if we always view this through the eyes of the soldier, the sailor, the airman or marine, then we can't go wrong.

With that I yield back.

The Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Boozman.

Mr. Boozman. Mr. Chairman, could I have a second?

The Chairman. Yes, sir.

Mr. Boozman. The only thing I would mention, and I know that Steve would agree with this, is the other firepower we have sitting up here is Colonel Malcom Shorter. He has done a number of things in his careers. Now retired. And I can speak from experience how valuable he was in his last assignment.

He took care of Congressmen as they were traveling on various journeys throughout the world, and he did a

tremendous job of taking care of me. So we do appreciate, just again -- I think you can see from what Steve was pointing out and then on both sides, you know, that the commitment, the staff that we got, they really are doing a tremendous job for you all.

Thank you.

The Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Boozman, and thank you for your recognition of Colonel Shorter. The vast majority of the staff on the committee are veterans of several wars that we all know about.

Let me just conclude the hearing, Commander, and say something about your members' role as we go through this budget process, because a lot of people say nobody has any power over this stuff; it is all special interests. I assure you that is not the case; that is, if you take the power that you have.

You had an employee that you mentioned, Jesse Brown, who served, of course, as a great Secretary of Veterans Affairs. There is a story -- I don't know if it is true or not, but it is legend -- that when he got an insufficient budget for veterans from the President, President Clinton at the time, he just stormed into the Oval Office and said, this is not right, you have got to increase it.

I mean, that is what your leadership has done, and we haven't had that kind of response to the President since.

But we have got to demand a better budget. The independent budget recommends something like a \$3 billion increase. Now, that sounds like a lot of money. Few of you make that, I assume. But our budget is \$3 trillion, so \$3 billion is one-tenth of 1 percent for our Nation's heroes.

I don't think we can afford not to do that. We are spending \$1 billion every 2 days on the war in Iraq; \$1 billion every 2 days. Surely there is money for the warrior for that war, and that is what we have to look at. So when you put that in that kind of context, you are only asking for something that this Nation can well afford. Can well afford.

But you have to keep, as I think the sergeant major said, our feet to the fire on this.

In past decades, up to 80 percent of the Congress had military experience. It is the reverse today; less than 20 percent. In Congress, House of Representatives, 435 Members, there are barely 100 who have had military experience. I am one of the 335.

That doesn't mean those people are evil, it just means those people haven't had, or we haven't had the kinds of experiences that you had. And you have to educate us, and you have the power to do that.

So it is very important that you are here today. But when you go home, you have got to go see your

Congressperson, and go see them and go see them and go see them, and learn the vocabulary of the budget, because they will respond to you if you go and see them. They will respond to you, especially if you let them know you know about what is going on. You have got to talk about the increases that we have to have and why it is so necessary and why it is so doable.

So your grassroots efforts when you go home is very important to what we are trying to do here. I mean, I wave around the independent budget, and going to try to meet that this year, but you have got to wave it in front of your Congressperson. The committee is fairly well informed, but we only have 29 people on the committee, and not all of them were here today, you noticed.

So the other 400 need to be educated. They really don't know what is going on here. We need your help in that. You do it the best. You really do it the best.

And, you know, in a time of war, George Washington said -- I think he said it the best -- the best criterion, the most important criterion of the morale of our fighting troops is the sense of how they are going to be treated when they come home.

So it is up to us, it is up to us to deal with that morale here at home when we can do it. We visited -- I was with Mr. Boozman, we visited our troops in Iraq and



Afghanistan, an incredible bunch of people doing the job. Not all of us agree with the policy that they are undertaking, but I will tell you that we are one, we are united in saying that every young man and woman who comes back from that war, who came back from a different war, should get all the care, the love, attention, the honor, respect that our Nation can give. And we will do that with your help.

So we thank you for being here, I am going to do something, Commander, that my colleagues are probably going to shoot me for, because Congress always has the last word. Commander Reynolds, you have the last word. Any thoughts, comments, rethinking? We thank you for being here. We thank you for your eloquence, and you have the final words.

Mr. Reynolds. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would just remember in closing that the cost of freedom is not free, and that cost will go long into the last bullet that has been fired. We as a Nation must remember that and honor those men and women that give us that right to enjoy the freedom and liberty of this great country.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chairman. Thank you, Commander.

The hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:30 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]