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HOUSE-SENATE JOINT HEARING TO RECEIVE

A LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF THE

DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS

Tuesday, February 27, 2007

House of Representatives,

Committee on Veterans' Affairs,

And

United States Senate,

Committee on Veterans' Affairs,

Washington, D.C.

The joint conference met, pursuant to call, at 2:00 p.m., in Room 345, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Robert Filner [Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs] presiding.

Present: Representatives Filner, Michaud, Herseth, Mitchell, Hall, Hare, McNerney, Walz, Buyer, Miller, Boozman,

Brown-Waite, Bilirakis, Lamborn.

Senators Akaka, Brown, Tester, Webb, Sanders, Craig.

Also Present: Senator Wyden

The *Chairman.* This hearing of the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committee will come to order to hear the legislative agenda of the Disabled American Veterans. Thank you all for being here. I am I guess a little happy and a little sad today; happy to see you all, this is a new day and that you haven't been here for over a year. You filled up the room, and it is good to have you and Commander Barton with us to hear the legislative agenda, and for all the members to see the congressional committees, and what we think and what we do. It is important that you have that, I think, personal knowledge. And we are glad you are in Washington. It is great weather for a change, so thank you for bringing that, And it is good to see you.

I am a little sad because the news that has come out in the last few weeks from the press about the situation, for example, at Walter Reed Hospital, a Marine committing suicide in Minnesota because he couldn't get the care he needed, cover story on this week's "Newsweek." Those stories reflect the fact that we are not doing things worthy of your sacrifice, and the present day sacrifice of the kids coming

back from Iraq and Afghanistan. We have got to do better.

And we are pledged, Republican and Democrat, Senate and House, to do better. We are pledged to do what is worthy of you. We made a \$3.6 billion down-payment in the so-called resolution for 2007 funding this year. The budget was late, shouldn't have happened, but we got a budget and we have added \$3.6 billion for veterans' healthcare. We got a budget from the President that for the first time in a long time increased the healthcare budget. I think the Congress is going to do better than that and move toward a budget worthy of you.

I don't know about you all but I think when we have a budget for the war, we need a budget for the warrior, the warriors who come home. And we are going to try to get that budget, to make sure that PTSD does not drive people to suicide, but to help them become productive in our society, to make sure that the backlog of claims of 600,000 doesn't drive people to mortgage their homes and lose their jobs, and to make sure that there are appointments for everyone when they need them, and not have to wait.

So that is what we are committed to do. I have worked

with the DAV for the last 15 years as a member of this Committee. You have got a grant staff in Washington, Commander. And to all of you folks who are with us, they do a great job. They helped to put together that Independent Budget, which we are going to try to move toward as quick as we can. But we thank you for your interest. And I am going to yield to the great Senator from Hawaii, the Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, Senator Akaka.

Mr. Chairman?

Senator *Akaka.* Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and aloha. Thank you. I want to add my welcome to all of you who are here today. And I want to say to my co-chair, Bob Filner from California, how great it is to be with him in this position, and with him in making every attempt to help the veterans of this country. And when I say "veterans" I mean all veterans, from World War I if we have any, all the way up to the war today.

In particular, I want to, Mr. Chairman, welcome and add my warm aloha to your great Chairman Bradley Barton, who is a national Commander, and welcome, Brad. And also I want to add my welcome to all of the DAV members, and especially I

want to name some names here, and I think they are here in the audience, from Hawaii. Wendell Kikuma--you are here, stand up--Catherine King, Harold Miname, and Brenda Reid, who have traveled all the way from my home State in Hawaii. Thank you so much for being here.

And along with my colleagues who are here today and those who serve in the House and Senate committees on Veterans' Affairs, I am delighted that this joint hearing forum has been--and let me underline this--reinstated.

This venue allows veterans' service organizations who represent veterans working with VA on a daily basis an opportunity to raise issues of concern with both committees. DAV has had a long tradition, beginning after World War I, of working tirelessly to assist disabled veterans and their families, a tradition that continues today. As Chairman of the Senate Committee, I am committed to working to ensure that our nation's veterans receive the highest quality of benefits and services.

Meeting the needs of veterans is truly part of the ongoing cost of war, and must be understood as such. Again this year I will continue to ensure that VA has the resources

it needs to care for those veterans who seek assistance. VA must not be seen as simply another department or agency asking for more funding. When we send our servicemembers into harm's way on behalf of the nation, we must be prepared to fund VA so that the department can furnish the necessary healthcare, rehabilitation, and compensation to those who served. Anything less is a breach of our fundamental obligations to those who wear our Nation's uniform.

Even as Congress debates the conflicts of Iraq and Afghanistan, we must ensure that VA is given the resources needed to carry out its missions. Not only for our newest veterans and those Guard and Reserve members coming home from conflict, but for veterans of all wars.

VA today is one of the premier healthcare providers in the nation, but we must face the reality that too many veterans are waiting for too long for both primary and specialized care. VA lacks sufficient resources to meet the growing demand. Our challenge is to ensure that VA has the tools and resources it needs to provide veterans with the care they require in a timely fashion. We also must enable VA to recruit and retain doctors and health professionals

across the country. I look forward to working with DAV and other VSOs in developing strategies to achieve these goals.

On the benefits side of the ledger, VA must be ready to adjudicate claims in a timely and accurate manner. Now is the time for VA to hire and train staff to meet the present and future demand for timely adjudication. I will continue to monitor VA's inventory and staffing requirements. Our nation's veterans deserve nothing less than having their claims fairly addressed without needless delay.

I am sure that all of you share my commitment to providing a seamless transition from military to civilian life for our newest generation of veterans. Failure to engage VA early in servicemembers' passage from active service to veteran status can result in VA not being fully prepared to meet their needs. We must make certain that VA is an active partner with the Departments of Defense and Labor, so that the newest veterans do not fall through the cracks.

Commander Barton, before I close, I want to straighten out a misconception that appears in your written testimony. But before I say that I want to tell you and all of you that

Senator Craig and I have worked on the Senate Committee these years, and have worked very well together, and I cherish the time that I had working with him for veterans, and will continue to do so.

Commander Barton, on page 13 there is a statement to the effect that prior to passage of the Omnibus Veterans' legislation last December, Senator Craig and I entered into an agreement to repeal the attorney provisions in the bill, and I am mentioning this because I wish to clarify that I agreed not to oppose any repeal effort, should one be made. I stand by that commitment and hope that clarifies the background for you.

In closing, again, I thank Commander Barton and the membership of DAV. Your service and dedication to this nation and its veterans has been unquestionable. I look forward to your presentation, and working with you in the future. Thank you very much. God bless each of you. God bless America.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Senator Akaka. And thank you for your leadership over many years.

I would recognize the Ranking Member in the House

Committee, Mr. Buyer.

Mr. *Buyer.* Thank you.

My fellow Hoosier, congratulations. We thank you for your service to country, and as you are continuing to serve our comrades. I also would like to recognize other Hoosiers are here: Joseph Eckerle, the State commander; Don Peek, the chair of the legislative Committee; Michael Wilhelm, the department adjutant; and Tony Craig, the senior national service officer, and Jim Thoreau, the senior vice commander, and Eric McGinnis, the state Sergeant at arms. Thank you for all of your service.

I would also put on the record that Commander Barton, you will be the second Commander to testify before us, prior to views and estimates. So it was very unusual--and it is the first time in 15 years, that I have seen the American Legion National Commander testify on the budget. That was very different. And it was very welcomed. And I had always hoped that testimony of organizations; VSOs and the MSOs, could be done prior to views and estimates.

And what has happened now is that Mr. Gorman, it is unique that you got yourself in to get that done prior to

views and estimates. But this process has been prejudicial now, to all of the other 17 organizations who don't get this opportunity. And I could never figure out how to get a joint House-Senate hearing in such a tight time frame to make all of that testimony timely. Just not going to be possible if you want to be fair to everyone. So this is rather unique.

It is unfortunate, though, that this hearing is being held at a time when members are in travel back, so this is not a hearing whereby you are going to get the opportunity to see all members of both the House and the Senate.

Also, over time, what had happened was, is that--I am glad that we have a pretty good attendance by the Senators here today. Because what had happened was, is that the Ranking and the Chairman would appear and it would be very poor attendance.

Also I would like for the record to reflect that I am most hopeful that we will continue our hearings in the fall, to do our look-back look-ahead. That was very helpful as we then took the testimony of the 19, and shared that with the administration, and now we have got a budget. We can debate the numbers, and we each have our recommendations with regard

to priorities, but a \$12 billion increase? That is large.

And when I look back two years ago, when I said--you know, all these fights and battles and things were going on over the budget, and the VSOs put their arms around the MSOs and said "okay, well, let us just say we are just going to do mandatory funding, that is going to be the solution to everybody's problem."

I had spent four years doing the modeling with the military health delivery system, and I recognized the challenges, and that is when I decided I am going to get into the modeling, the healthcare modeling finance mechanisms. And that is when we learned that stale data and very poor inputs were being utilized.

And I want all of you to know that Secretary Nicholson stepped forward and claimed ownership. He said, "I accept that responsibility, and I claim ownership of my budgets." And I congratulate him, because these last two budgets, you have seen around the \$20 billion number over the last two years, and that has been pretty extraordinary.

So I don't sit easy--being a critic is the easiest job in the world. But to be constructive and to be substantive,

and at the same time, when individuals are a constructive critic, if somebody does something right, you ought to tell the secretary he has done something right. So I just wanted to get that on the record.

Secondly, I wanted to say to Chairman Akaka, congratulations, and to Larry Craig--and I thank you for the bill that we got out last December. It was hard, it was challenging, and I am not sure I completely understood your statement, Chairman Akaka, with regard to the attorney rep position. Here's how it happens. We have innovative things we do in the House; the Senate has innovative provisions, and then the three of us came together, and we tried to work out how do we do this.

And you have to compromise. And I am willing to stand behind the deal that Senator Akaka and Larry Craig and I struck on that day. And I am also willing to see whether or not the intent that Lane Evans had and Mr. Craig has, if in fact this works. And so I am not--it is a curious thing for me to immediately then say "repeal it, repeal it, repeal it," when it hasn't even gotten off the ground.

So I want to thank both gentlemen for their

bipartisanship. A lot of good things happened in that bill. The major construction projects, over 24 of them and 15 minor projects. We expanded tele-health initiatives; we expanded the number of the community outpatient clinics; by gosh, we explored new options with regard to Puerto Rico and the Charleston model and how it is good to be leveraged with regard to New Orleans, and I thank you for that.

But there also is something I also want to thank the Senate, and they worked with us. It was the changes for Chapter 35, and when we have the a soldier that we know is going to be 100 percent disabled, and we know that we have to have a lot of surgeries and things in the time period; let us open up those Chapter 35 benefits to the spouse so she can get her education. And the Senate stepped forward with that and the House did, and I want to thank them for doing that.

I saw your written testimony, so I will pause here and I will listen to your responses to any questions that people may have, and I will be an attentive listener. The signature injury of this present war is the traumatic brain injury. And again, I don't get an opportunity to thank my colleagues from the Senate very often and I want to say to them thank

you for working with us, about three years ago, the appropriators, when they created the polytrauma centers.

And let me conclude with this, because many of you may not realize this. So I want to tell the story so you can help educate your communities. Good things are happening on the prevention side. Remember that helmet that you wore, and it had that sling system in it, and it gave you all those headaches, and it was a real pain in the--right? Well, what we learned is that when the roadside bombs would go off, and the demand of the American people, "Protect these soldiers at all costs, well, what does "all costs" mean?

Then, we give the up-armored Hummers, we then do all the body armor so they get their breastplates, side plates, shoulder plates, neck plate, groin plate, we got the brand-new Kevlar helmet, wonderful, the best in the world against ballistics with that chin strap on, but what happens?

When the roadside bomb goes off, a soldier is now riding in a vault on wheels. There is the fireball, the shrapnel comes in, shreds the limbs. We can protect the torso but what is getting them? It is the G-force. The force comes rolling in, and there is nothing to absorb it. So when you

watch the Indianapolis 500, or the NASCAR--and in particular the 500, when the car hits the wall, it goes into thousands of pieces. It is kinetic energy, it is built that way. But when this G-force rolls in the up-armored hummer, and all the body armor on a soldier, there is nothing to absorb the force. And part of it comes up the chest. It goes up the face. And as it goes up the face we get maxillofacial damage, we get damage to the eyes, to the ears, and it goes up into this helmet. We get a concussion and a pre-concussion.

So what do we do? Last year we got the Marine Corps to actually study that sling system in that helmet, and they studied it at the University of Virginia, and what they learned is they can go to a pad system and reduce the G-force almost in half. And they have rushed that to the Marines in the field, and the Army have it.

Our enemies are smart. And you know you have got to improvise, and adapt, and overcome, and just as we do that our enemies do that too. But those of us in the VA, and those of us who have the responsibility of the VA, we also have to be so responsive to these injuries and how they occur.

And with that I enjoy working with these men. Thank you.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Mr. Buyer. Senator Craig, thank you for joining us. Thank you for the joint hearings, and we recognize you for a statement.

Senator *Craig.* Well, Mr. Chairman, let me thank you and congratulate you on your position. It is great to be back with you and with Chairman Buyer, and the House. Both Senator Akaka and I have a working very well together over the last several years, and look forward to working collectively with you.

Commander, welcome before us. Let me thank you for being here and bringing with you this force behind you. Let me recognize from Idaho, our department commander, Doug Stewart and his wife, Edgar Dunas and his wife, and Robert Bigness. We are glad they have joined with you and are here today. And again, we welcome all of you back to Washington, D.C. And we appreciate not only the service you once provided our country, but the service you now provide your fellow veterans. Your patriotism and your involvement is inspiring.

Commander, I look forward to your testimony before us today and I don't want to take much time, but let me be frank with you about some of the issues I see in your testimony, because I think it is important for the record. Commander Barton, first I want to clarify for the record, as I believe my colleague from the Senate has, a mis-statement as I view it in your testimony.

Contrary to the assertion in your testimony, Chairman Akaka, as he has just stated, and I did not agree that we would introduce legislation to repeal the law that grants veterans the right to hire an attorney if they so wish. So your request that we honor our agreement is in my opinion a little misplaced.

Still, there was an agreement made. And Senators who are there, who were there that night, are still discussing how best to reconcile any commitments that were made, and how to go forward on that. It was a stumbling block at the time, and I and others looked at the much broader issue of the total bill, and former Chairman Buyer went through many of those things, and we saw it necessary to move forward for the good of all veterans.

Second, I hope your organization and others that make up the Independent Budget will start to discuss a way to recognize collected revenue that VA receives each year. I understand that your organization holds the view that collections should be extra money in addition to any direct appropriations provided by Congress for VA's budget. However, the reality is that each year, as appropriators are putting together a budget--and I happen to wear two hats in this arena; one as an authorizer, and one as an appropriator--we have to look at what makes up a whole budget.

Congress I don't believe can simply ignore \$2 billion or more in collections that can responsibly be counted for in a budget, and that is what we are looking at now as relates to these collections. Under no other circumstance in any other area of government or in any area of private business would you simply accept a collection of \$2 billion, and not factor that into the total budget, and I believe it would be helpful for all of us in Congress to be more accurate, so that we can compare the Independent Budget that has been well crafted over the years. It shapes different points of view as it relates to the overall delivery of services and benefits to

our veterans, and I congratulate you and other VSOs on that effort.

Third, I would like to address in a more detailed way something that I think is tremendously important, and that is your opposition and my support of the issue of hiring lawyers. Now, in the fairness of full disclosure, I want you to understand, I am not an attorney. As one who sponsors the choice of representation, though, I do not and cannot agree that it sends a message to veterans that a lawyer is, quote, "necessary."

This law would simply provide veterans with an option of hiring lawyers, if they so choose. If quality, free representation is available from VSOs, and that is true today, I fully expect most veterans would decide that it is better to take the free service than to pay for a lawyer.

But I also understand the complication of the phases of an appeal, as is necessary to take one through to gaining sometimes his or her benefits through the claims process.

So I do believe that it is important that we change, and I believe that it is time that an organization--or I should say people--that our president has accurately called our

nation's finest citizens, are mature enough and capable enough to decide for themselves when it is necessary to hire representation.

As to your concern about how this new law may impact the VA's claim process, I would ask you to consider this. Mr. Commander, several years ago, DAV and other veterans' organizations supported passage of the Veterans' Claims Assistance Act, even though some were predicting--correctly as it turned out--that the VCAA would add to the complexity and the length of the claims process. I assumed, despite those unintended consequences--and that is what happened--no one here would seek to repeal the Veterans' Claim Assistance Act. Why? Because it was the right thing to do for our nation's veterans.

Simply providing veterans with the right to hire an attorney, a privilege that is not denied to any other adult in our nation, in my opinion is the right thing to do. That is why I supported a change in policy.

Mr. Commander, I want to share with you the common goals we all carry. Everyone who serves on this Committee, all of you who are seated before us today. To care for and to

provide a quality healthcare system for our veterans, to compensate in a fair and accurate way an adjudication process for them, and to honor them at the end of their lives. I want to congratulate you on being elected the National Commander of the DAV, and want you to know that all of us who sit on the dais today are here because we chose to be here in defense of and in support of America's veterans, and those who are soon to become our veterans. Again. Thank you so much for your service. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Senator Craig. With us today is an alumnus of the House of Representatives, now a United States senator, who will properly introduce your commander, Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon.

**STATEMENT OF HON. RON WYDEN, A UNITED STATES SENATOR FROM THE
STATE OF OREGON**

Senator *Wyden.* Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and I greatly appreciate your passion for the cause of veterans, and in fact, the bipartisan passion for the cause of veterans. And you can sign me up for your "do better for veterans program," put me down.

I am very proud to be able to introduce Mr. Brad Barton, the National Commander of the Disabled American Veterans and a former commander of the Portland DAV chapter. His military career started when he enlisted in the Corps in 1966. Just two years later, while bravely serving during the Vietnam War as a member of the third Battalion, the 26th Marine Regiment, he was severely injured when shrapnel from an enemy mortar severed his spinal cord.

As a result of those wounds he was medically separated from the Corps on August of 1968. But Mr. Barton--and you are going to see it when he testifies today--has a relentless determination, and it never slowed him, neither while he was serving in the Marines, nor later on, and he got a bachelor's

degree from Indiana University in 1973, and his law degree from Indiana University in 1982.

Now, he first became active in DAV--and that was noted I think by the ranking minority member--when he joined the Indianapolis chapter in 1975. While in Indiana, he was the recipient of the DAV Department of Indiana Meritorious Occupational Achievement Award for 1979, and was named the Indiana Governor's Handicapped Hoosier of the year for that year.

As an attorney he has volunteered an enormous amount of time to assist many of his fellow disabled veterans in obtaining the benefits they were entitled to but not automatically given. I have followed this debate about lawyers versus non-lawyers. Any way you slice it, I am sitting next to somebody who fights for veterans every chance he gets.

When Mr. Barton moved to Oregon 10 years ago, he joined the DAV chapter in our city. He served as Commander and adjutant of the Portland chapter before taking on his current role as membership Chairman. At the national level, he served as Chairman of the National Finance Committee and is a

member of the DAV National Executive Committee for the 19th District. He served as the National Fourth, Third, Second, and First Junior Vice Commander before being elected to serve as Senior Vice Commander.

After more than 30 years of steadily advancing up the leadership ladder, he reached the highest rung of this extremely outstanding veterans' service organization when he was elected to serve as National Commander of the DAV in August.

As we all know the DAV represents more than a million disabled veterans and their families. He has proven to be an excellent leader, a spokesperson for the organization, and I am proud to join with many Oregonians to we are thrilled to have him represent our state today.

As he lays out to the DAV's legislative priorities and his views on the VA budget, I hope that you are going to give his recommendations serious consideration. I would also like to note that we have some other visitors from Oregon today; our State Commander Duane Adams; National Service Supervisor Jay Woodbury; the DAV Portland Chapter junior First Vice Commander, Craig Georgeoff; and Portland DAV members Bob

Afielo and Tim Millisic. We Are really pleased that you can have an Oregonian. We will share him with the distinguished Ranking Minority Member, so that he could lead off this critically important hearing, a hearing that takes place as we start the budget process, and I am very gratified to be able to introduce to you Mr. Barton. Thank you.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Senator. Thank you very much.

I know the Senator would want to stay for testimony but he has a vote over on the Senate side. So thank you, Senator Wyden.

Commander, you are on.

STATEMENT OF BRADLEY S. BARTON, NATIONAL COMMANDER, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS, ACCOMPANIED BY EDWARD R. REESE, JR., NATIONAL SERVICE DIRECTOR, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS; JOSEPH A. VIOLANTE, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS; DAVID W. GORMAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WASHINGTON HEADQUARTERS, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS; ARTHUR H. WILSON, NATIONAL ADJUTANT, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS; EDWARD E. HARTMAN, NATIONAL DIRECTOR OF VOLUNTARY SERVICE, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS; DONNA TANNER, DAVA NATIONAL COMMANDER.

Commander *Barton.* Thank you. Thank you, Senator Wyden as well.

Messrs. Chairman, I want to personally thank you for this opportunity to appear before you and your committees. As you know, DAV was troubled by your decision last year to end our opportunity to testify before a joint hearing of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees. Thank you in your leadership for recognizing the importance of this hearing and for reinstating it.

Messrs. Chairman and members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, 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 Dave Gorman and Rick Patterson, National Service Director Randy Reese, Legislative Director Joe Violante, Voluntary Services Director Ed Hartman, Auxiliary National Commander, Donna Tanner of Massachusetts, DAV Senior Vice Commander Rob Reynolds of Virginia, Junior Vice Commanders Ray Dempsey of Illinois, Bobbie Berera of Texas, Wallace Tyson of North Carolina, and Jerome G. Crece of Minnesota, National Judge Advocate, Mike Dodmeyer of North Dakota, Past National Commander Paul Jackson of Colorado, Chaplain Edward Bastille of New Hampshire, and National Chief of Staff, Stan Barton of Oregon. Let me also introduce my wife, my partner, my friend, Donna, and my brother, Otho Barton.

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

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

I also wish to recognize the Department of Oregon Commander, Dwayne Adams, and the entire DAV delegation from the State of Oregon.

Also with us today are some brave young men and women who have been injured while serving our nation in Iraq. Specialist Gregory Williams. Staff Sergeant Frank Valentine. Specialist Armando Santiago. And Corporal Noe Santos. Thank you all for your service and welcome home.

Messrs. Chairman and members of the Veterans' Affairs committees, on behalf of the more than one and a half 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 Representative Filner, congratulation on your elevation to Chairman of your respective Veterans' Affairs Committees. Senator Craig, Representative Buyer, I congratulate you as ranking members of the Veterans' Affairs Committees. I wish all of you on these committees Godspeed in your efforts on behalf of our nation's disabled veterans, their dependents and survivors.

As President Theodore Roosevelt said, a man who is good enough to shed his blood for his country is good enough to be given a square deal. For six years now America's brave young men and women have been in harm's way in Iraq and

Afghanistan. Each day new casualties return to America for medical care and rehabilitation. A few weeks ago I had the opportunity to attend the dedication for the Center for the Intrepid at Brooke Army Medical Center, and something that General Peter Pace, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said about the wounded being treated there really hit home with me.

He said, and I quote, "People say that he lost a leg, he lost an arm, or she lost her sight in this war. I object. They gave their arm, they gave their leg, and she gave her sight, for our freedom."

I think that speaks volumes about what brave men and women do every day in the defense of our nation. They do these things not for profit, but for love of their country. And we as a nation owe them all that we can give them to make sure their life and sacrifice are not ignored and not undervalued.

And something that singer John Mellencamp--and a fellow Hoosier--said a week or so after performing at the dedication that I thought was worth repeating. He said it was a very nice thing that so many Americans contributed to the building

of the Center for the Intrepid. And he was very impressed with those injured warriors who were in such good spirits. He said he felt they felt it was their duty to make the sacrifice for our nation, but he wondered out loud, will they feel the same way in 15 years?

As a Vietnam veteran, I have often wondered if my injuries were in vain. But I believe what really matters is whether those who oppose our policy value it.

But I believe what really matters also, I think it makes a difference whether our government shows that they appreciate it by making sure that I don't have to worry about medical care or how to support myself and my family. Those two benefits alone have taken a great burden from me after being wounded. So I can think of no better way for our nation to show its support for our disabled veterans than to make sure they don't have to worry about how to get medical care, or to support themselves and their families.

Today the care our troops received from the military is excellent. However, recently a "Washington Post" series revealed the appalling living conditions for wounded veterans while receiving outpatient care at Walter Reed Army Medical

Center. Messrs. Chairman, you and other members of these committees have been among the strongest voices in demanding immediate corrective action, and to make sure that anything of this nature never happens again.

And I commend you for your prompt, forceful actions in this matter. Thank you. But when our troops transition to veteran status, I am concerned about their ability to get quality healthcare and benefits in a timely manner from the Department of Veterans' Affairs. If our government continues to underfund VA programs and fails to provide funding at the start of the fiscal year, it will fail to honor America's commitment to our sick and disabled veterans.

Fortunately and thankfully, the recently-passed Continuing Resolution increased funding for the VA by \$3.6 billion. But that money was more than four months late. And while the Administration's 2008 budget comes close to providing adequate funding for veterans' programs, it still does not guarantee the VA will receive those funds by the beginning of the new fiscal year. Mandatory funding would solve that problem.

Messrs. Chairman, thank you for agreeing to hold these

hearings on the issue of budget reform for the VA. We welcome an open and frank discussion of how the VA healthcare appropriations process might be improved to better serve our nation's sick and disabled veterans.

The DAV is also concerned that the 2008 budget proposal does not fund enhancements to the VA specialized health-care programs such as mental healthcare, or blind rehabilitation services, among others. We therefore urge these committees and Congress to again reject higher copayments, enrollment fees, and fully fund veterans' healthcare at \$36.8 billion through direct appropriations.

The administration budget also fails to provide necessary resources for the Veterans Benefits Administration. Another issue is that the budget doesn't take into account the potential adverse impact of new attorney's fee provisions on the VA's resources, the timeliness problem, and the worsening claims backlog. In addition to our recommendation of 10,675 full-time employees for compensation and pension service, adjudicators must be properly trained to correctly decide cases based on the law and the facts presented. And they must be held accountable for their performance. All too

many cases must be re-adjudicated not once but multiple times before a correct decision is rendered. Veterans deserve to have their claims rated timely and accurately the first time.

Messrs. Chairman, the major policy positions of the DAV are derived from resolutions adopted at our annual national conventions. Our current mandates cover a broad range of programs and services, and have been made available to your committees and your staffs. As we 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 increases in grants for automobiles and specially adaptive housing, and provide an automatic annual increase based on the cost of living. Increase the face value of service-disabled veterans' insurance. Authorize the 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 you to support H.R. 634 to authorize the minting of coins to help fund America Veterans Disabled for Life memorial.

Messrs. Chairman, I am very proud of what the DAV stands for and what we have accomplished in our 87-year history. Our nationwide core of professionally trained national service officers, transition service officers are the best in the business. All our NSOs and TSOs are wartime service-connected disabled veterans. Last year alone, they counseled--free of charge--a quarter million veterans and their family members in claims for VA benefits. Our mobile service program puts our NSOs on the road to assist veterans where they live, in rural communities, inner cities, in areas devastated by natural disasters. And thanks to a \$1 million pledge from the Harley Davidson Foundation, we were able to expand the reach of our NSOs to millions of veterans of all generations.

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 two and a half million hours of free essential services to

patients at VA facilities.

Since we began our free transportation program, the DAV has purchased and donated nearly 1800 vans to the VA at a cost of \$36 million. This year we will present the VA with 164 more new vans. Since 1987 our vans and volunteer drivers have provided more than 10 million round trips to veterans, traveling more than 388 million miles. This program serves disabled veterans at every State and every congressional district in this country.

And for all they do to serve our veterans and their communities, these magnificent volunteers are a source of pride and inspiration to us all. And I want to acknowledge their commitment and compassion to our nation's veterans. Thank you all very much.

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

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Commander. Your eloquence attests to the reason why these hearings are so valuable. And I would say that, as many of your staff would attest, that we can have these public and also involve the DAV and all the other VSOs into the processes at the time that their input makes sense. We have met on the budget. We have met on this committee's agenda. So we have tried to incorporate the VSOs, including, of course, DAV into that process.

If the clerk will start the timer, every one of us will have five minutes, please, including the Chair and the Ranking Member, okay?

I want to assure everybody in the audience, and especially the young men who you introduced, Commander, recently returned, we come from both parties. We have different views on the war itself. But we have no difference in saying that every one of these young men and women who come back, deserve the best this country can do. We have to take them all in our arms and our hearts, welcome them, give them all the care they need, not only today but for all the time that is going to come. So thank you.

They have done everything we have asked them to do with courage and competence, and we need to show that. And we will attempt to do that as a nation. I think that is where we can all, by the way, contribute to this war effort. Yes, it is a volunteer force. No, we don't have to save aluminum. But every kid that comes back--I have to say "kid," you know, that doesn't show a lack of disrespect, but we all have to understand as a nation the issues that have to do with, both physical and mental. We have to embrace them and show that this nation loves and supports them, and that is how we all can contribute to this war effort, so we will try as a nation to do that, we promise you.

Commander, I was reflecting as you have, and many of us have on this, on these situations that you mentioned, at Walter Reed and in the VA system. It seems to me--and I think you are absolutely right in this, in that mandatory funding is one necessity that we have to get to, and we will try to do that in this Congress. I hope that we can get there.

And it is not just funding, of course. I mean, we have seen incidence of apparent indifference and callous behavior.

I am convinced that everyone in the DAV wants to help veterans. We have put them in a position where they don't have the resources, and they get--I mean, they are drowned in the kind of work they have to do, and we haven't given them the resources to be human in response. So we have to make sure that those resources are there. I am also trying to think through, and I hope you will help me--and you can try to answer today, but in the future.

I think we need some new forms of oversight here that the traditional hearing process does not give us, to make sure that--I mean, every one of us congresspeople hears from your members and other organizations' members who are in those hospitals or in the clinics, they are on the streets everyday. They are experts, and we hear things that we need to fix. And perhaps we should have some oversight that involves veterans in the communities, that will help us raise the level of care for veterans from whatever war. We need to do something more direct, hands-on, to understand what is going on. And maybe we can think that through. I think we need a hotline staffed by veterans, who can take reports about what is going on and attempt to try to deal with it.

So each one of those things have some dangers associated with it, so I hope you will help me and the Committee think things through, as we try to come to grips with this care, and if you have any thoughts on that, on how we conduct that oversight in a new way, I would be happy to hear it now or in the future.

Commander *Barton.* I'm sure our national staff and our legislative director would be happy to work with you on coming up with some ideas on how that might be accomplished.

The *Chairman.* Thank you and I think we owe it to our veterans to do it.

Mr. Ranking Member, would you allow Senator Sanders to have his time, because he needs to go for a vote? Thank you.

We yield to Senator Sanders from Vermont. Great to see you back here.

Sen. *Sanders.* And it is good to see you in your position. And I hope all of you recognize, because I worked with this guy for 16 years, that you have an incredibly strong veterans' advocate in Bob Filner, who now is chairing the Committee. I want to just begin by telling you a secret, and you have got to promise not to tell anybody else, okay?

Just between us, and here's my secret. If anybody tells you who have put your lives on the line to defend this country that we do not have the resources in this, the wealthiest country in the history of the world, to take care of every man, woman, who has defended this country, they are not telling you the truth.

And let me be very blunt. At a time when we have 22,000 wounded soldiers in Iraq, we have huge numbers of men and women who have fought from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Persian Gulf I, and Iraq; we have people on waiting lines all over this country. You all have seen the disgrace of what happened at Walter Reed Hospital. So when people tell you that the United States government does not have the resources to keep the promises made for the veterans in this country, then you ask them how come they have hundreds of billions of dollars available to give tax breaks to the richest one percent?

If we can provide--and I tell you this is seriously, you think I am not telling you the truth, I am. In the President's budget, if it were passed, which it will not be passed, thank God, there are families in America, families,

that would receive over \$30 billion in tax relief, and somehow we don't have the four or \$5 billion to take care of our veterans. Give me a break.

Commander, my message to you today is A., it is wonderful to see ordinary Americans coming out to defend their own interests, because time after time, in all of the committees that we are on, we see lobbyists who make hundreds of thousands of dollars a year fighting for special interests, really don't need it. So it is delightful. And what I want all of you to do is to put your heads up high. You are not asking for any favors. We owe you more than we can ever pay you. But the very least we can do is keep the promises they made to you.

Now, we are working on legislation with members of the House and the Senate that I think follows very closely for the wonderful, wonderful work that the DAV has done with the other service organizations and their Independent Budget. It is an outrage to my mind that we have thrown hundreds of thousands of category eight veterans off the VA healthcare, and we are going to bring them back. We are going to eliminate the veterans' disability tax for all veterans. We

are going to reduce and ultimately eliminate the backlog on claims at the VA which the commander has spoken about. We are going to increase burial benefits, and we are going to end the offset in benefits for survivors. And you know what? We have got money to do it. We have got the money to do it.

My small State of Vermont, one of the smallest States in the country, but it has paid a heavy price in this war. We have lost more soldiers per capita than any other. We have paid a long and heavy price throughout our history. And I just want to recognize Commander Reid of the Vermont DAV, as well as the Department Adjutant, Roger Burgery, for the excellent work they have done for Vermont veterans. Gentlemen, thank you very much.

I just want to conclude by telling you we can win this fight. We can win it, and that we are going to win it. I think with the Chairman that we have, we are going to turn this debate around. And finally, America is going to keep the promises that it made to the men and women who served our country. Thank you all for being here.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Senator. We miss him in the House.

Congressman Buyer, you are recognized for five minutes, and then we will have it, and then one of your colleagues.

Mr. *Buyer.* It is a curious thing. It is a curious thing. We all wear the uniform. We fight for freedom. It is about liberty, and what we do for our loved ones whom are so far away. I never thought I would see this day. I am going to be very candid, Commander, with you. I never thought I would see this day. I respect the gentleman from Vermont. I respect his views. I respect his party ideology as the only Socialist member of the House and Senate. But I never thought I would see this day where my comrades whom are also disabled would do that.

So it is a curious thing, Commander. You spoke honestly to us about your gut and your feelings, and I thank you for that because you know people are afraid to do that today, because their fear that it might get misinterpreted one way or the other. It is that Hoosier in you that I think that is coming out.

And I worry about what you just said when you talked about when you came home from Vietnam and you thought about what John Mellencamp thought--15 years later, and then you--I

wrote it down. Those who oppose the policy, do they value it? And I worry. I worry for those young men that you introduced. I do. And in a heartbeat, you can get into a discussion with anyone here in the House and Senate about their views on the war, and it is also another curious thing, how people say, "well, I oppose the war, but I support the troops," or the latest was "I support the troops, but I oppose the surge" or something like that. That is like me saying to you "I support you in that it will get you all your training, your armor, your munitions, or food, your support, but I'll tell you what, Commander, you don't get reinforcements. Good luck on your mission." It is a curious thing.

So when you made this comment to me about how you feel when John Mellencamp made that statement to you, I feel the same way. So I, in my gut and in my very being, of the now, 31 years associated with United States Military, the Army, and my time at the Citadel, I was very bothered when the opening of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee to Susan Sarandon and war protesters. I have to be tolerant. I have to say, "Steve, you know that is what you fight for. You

fight so other people can give their views and their opinions and that is wonderful." But what I worry about most is that we are engaged in a generation of--a fight for a generation against a people who want to--our enemy is so dastardly, and America is suffering from this one, two, three being killed a day and the wounded, and all that we are caring for, and there is a war fatigue that is very real, a war fatigue.

And I worry about our vigilant. I really worry about our vigilant. I worry about them now facing an enemy that says "Hey, we must have some and some momentum on our side," and I worry about that.

So I am going to speak honestly with you, so I want to thank you for speaking honestly about your feelings, because I really worry for them. I just drove back yesterday. I did my annual training. I throw on the uniform and I get to be with the soldiers and I get to hear them, to, and that is why I said, I worry about them.

Ms. Tanner, I want to congratulate you. You worked hard to get your position. And for all those men out there that think they are a success; they are a success because of all the good things the auxiliary does behind them. And I know

that since my mother was president of the Indiana American Legion Auxiliary. So I know all the years of effort that she put in to have that position, so I congratulate you and I congratulate all the ladies.

I made notes, I make notes. Not only from your oral statements, but also from your written statements, and Mr. Filner and his caucus will meet and they will come up with their views and estimates and we will come up with ours. I maintain my priorities; to care for the disabled, those with special needs and the indigent are the highest priority. And I will caucus with my colleagues on this side, and we put together our priorities, the voc-rehab and the blind rehabilitation, a very strong listener to you. You will see big plus-ups from our side of the aisle. And our advanced planning on our construction accounts, and we will--I think we are in agreement with Mr. Filner about the increase in the FTE on the claims processing, and we are being a good listener to you, Commander.

So I want to thank you all for your testimony and I yield back.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Mr. Buyer. Mr. Boozman?

Mr. *Boozman.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Again, I want to thank all of you all for being here. Congratulations to you, Mr. Barton, and I appreciated your testimony. I think it is very helpful. I know for many of you it is a tough trip to come here and tromp around in the halls of Congress, but it is really very impressive to see you out and about as you make your visits; looking at your congressman, looking them in the eye, telling them that these various things are very important to you.

I especially want to thank a very large delegation from Arkansas. We had the opportunity to have lunch and visit about the issues that are important to you. A couple things I would like to just ask you about. You know, one thing, I understand the importance of funding that we can depend on. You know, right now, we get the budget. The budget invariably is late. You know, the VA can't plan out years. So again, I agree with you, that is a big problem. You know, mandatory funding is one thing. Certainly, at least like we do with the highway bill and some of these other things where you have multiple years, maybe a five or six year, but most importantly, I think is that we have got to have adequate

funding. You can have mandatory funding and still not have adequate funding. I think that is very, very important, you know, that again, we need adequate funding for the things that we need to get done.

I would like for you to comment on that, and then also I would like for you to comment--again, as we sit around the table today, we talked about a lot of issues that have come up through the years. The issue about the legal representation as it stands now is a little different. So I really would like for you to maybe comment on that. I know some of our people are a little bit concerned about perhaps an adversarial relationship being developed. Another comment was about perhaps bogging down the system. Again, I don't know that those things are going to occur by any means, but could you comment about that a little bit while we have got you here?

Commander *Barton.* Well, I know the staff has some things to say, but I do want to respond to this because this, to me, is one of the worst things that you did thinking you were doing us a favor. I don't think any veteran should have to pay anything other than his blood on the battlefield to

get the benefits he so rightly deserves.

They have paid the price once and they shouldn't have to pay it a second time. We don't object to attorneys being involved in the process. We object to attorneys getting paid for it. I practiced law for 11 years. I work with disabled veterans and their families all the time. I did not charge them a fee for my service, nor did I want to. I respected them, I respected their service, and I wanted them to be taken care of by country.

Now I know when you passed this bill, you thought you were doing the right thing. And you have got good hearts, I know you do. If you didn't, you wouldn't be in this room listening to me now. But I petition you, I beg you, I pray that you reconsider this inappropriate legislation and repeal it. It does a disservice to veterans. It does a disservice to their sacrifice for our nation. It does a disservice to America.

So now I am going to let the staff address the issues of funding. Thank you.

Mr. *Boozman.* Thank you, Mr. Barton. I think if anybody--

The *Chairman.* It had been so unclear, Commander.

(Laughter.)

Mr. *Boozman.* Well, that is what I was going to say, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for making it very plain as to how you felt about that.

Go ahead and if you would, just allude to the funding. I have got just a few seconds left.

Mr. *Gorman.* The commander has put me in a pretty bad position, Mr. Boozman, to try to respond after that. On the funding issue, I would only say that I think you hit it right on the head and it has been alluded to and stated very plainly before. The VA has had to wait almost a full five months for their funding this year. Hospital directors are running deficits out there. They can't hire people, they are unwilling to hire people, because if there is going to be some mechanism--and we have said before that mandatory funding is what we think will do that. Perhaps it won't. Perhaps there is another way to go. And I congratulate the Chairmen on both sides, as the Commander alluded to, for at least having hearings this year to sit down at the table with you, fully with the appropriators, with the administration,

and to try to come to some conclusion about what we can do to fix this flawed system, because I don't think anybody disagrees that it is a flawed system as far as funding is concerned. You can't get better healthcare anywhere in this nation, or anywhere in the world, than you get from any Department of Veterans' Affairs medical facility, but they need to have the resources, both in dollars and in human resources, in order to get that medical care delivered to veterans, and veterans can get in there on a timely basis.

That is key, and that is where the system is flawed. So we welcome the opportunity to comment on your question, and also look forward to the opportunity to sit down again as I said with you and your colleagues and try to hammer this issue out to some reasonable conclusion.

Mr. *Boozman.* Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Mr. Boozman. Mr. Michaud, who chairs our Health Subcommittee.

Mr. *Michaud.* Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Appreciate your having this hearing today.

Commander, I appreciate you coming, along with a lot of room filled of veterans. I have a few questions, but before

I do, I also want to thank the folks from Maine who decided to come to the sunny south today, as well, for coming down for this hearing. Commander, we have a lot of issues in front of us, and as Ranking Member Buyer mentioned, you are very fortunate you are coming before we do the views and estimates, which both sides will be working on later in the week.

We have read a lot of articles over the past month, whether it's the Walter Reed, what is happening out at Walter Reed, the "Newsweek" articles, read a lot of newspapers about men who have come back from Iraq and Afghanistan, who try to get into the VA for mental health services, who are put on a waiting list and ultimately and unfortunately have committed suicide.

Where we will be dealing with the views and estimates, though, you talked about mandatory funding and I agree with Mr. Boozman. Each one of us might have a different idea of what mandatory funding is, and I agree also that mandatory funding might not be a good thing if it is not adequate funding. And I think it is very important that we provide adequate funding for healthcare.

My question to you, Commander, is when you look at the claims backlog that we currently have in the system, we have heard statistics, about 30 percent of men and women coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan have some form of PTSD. We have traumatic brain injuries. You know, the VA a number of years ago went through the CARES process. We have, you know, a backlog when you look at what's happening throughout hospitals throughout the country, as far as maintenance and upgrades in our hospitals.

What are your top priorities, as far as Commander of the DAV? How should we start dealing with all of these issues that are out there?

Commander *Barton.* Well, I think it is disgraceful that we have a 600,000 claims backlog in the VA. And I think the only resolution to that is to make sure that they have the funding levels to hire the employees they need to process those claims, to ensure they are properly trained, to hold them accountable for their ratings, and to make sure that veterans get their claims decided timely and accurately the first time.

And you know, this gets back to my attorney thing, and I

don't want to beat this to death, but injecting attorneys into this process--if this system is broken, and we think it is, and I think some of you think it is also, then adding attorneys to the process is not going to make it any better. It is going to make it more adversarial; it is going to make it more contentious; it is going to be a less informal process for veterans to pursue, to get his benefits. I am sure that is not what you want. That is certainly not what we want. Now I would invite my staff to add anything to that.

Mr. *Gorman.* Again, the commander hit it on the target. It is training, it is resources of people, real people, that are trained and are held accountable for their decisions. That is key. Right now, I don't believe the VA ratings specialists, on an individual basis, are held accountable.

And I think we have talked about the adequacy of funding. I think that goes together hand-in-hand with the issue of short funding or mandatory funding. I think you can do both of those at the same time, and come up with a much better system than we have today.

Mr. *Michaud.* My next question is--this is my fifth year on this Committee. I really enjoy this Committee, and I have heard, over the last four years, members of the minority party at that time, Democrats, talk about how we can do better as Democrats, and we will work to do better if we are in the majority. We are in the majority in both the House and the Senate.

My question to you, Commander, is during my four years in the minority, I have always stated that we have to provide the adequate healthcare for our veterans, but also to make sure that the money is spent in a manner that is cost effective and efficient. We have an Independent Budget, and I have been hearing from some of my colleagues on other committees, "Well, we might not have the funding to do what we have to do."

As Commander of the DAV, and representing members throughout the country in the DAV from both political parties, and I hope that you, as Commander, will hold us in the majority accountable to make sure that as members-elect in Congress, that we provide the adequate resources that we need to take care of our veterans in this country, and that

you will not step back from your goal to hold us accountable, on both sides of the aisle. Do I have that commitment, Commander?

Commander *Barton.* You certainly have my commitment, but I want all of you to put the question this way, "Can I do better as a Democrat, can I do better as a Republican," forget that. We don't care about parties. Ask the question, "Can I do better as an American, and take care of our veterans?" That is what is important today.

Mr. *Michaud.* I am very glad to hear you say that, Commander. And I look forward to working with you, and I look forward to working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to make sure that we do provide adequate funding levels to take care of the men and women who fought for this country. Thank you very much, Commander.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Mr. Michaud.

I would recognize the gentleman from Minnesota, Mr. Walz. And I am told he is the highest-ranking enlisted man ever to serve in Congress. Thank you.

Mr. *Walz.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you, Commander Barton.

The *Chairman.* Explain that, what I just said.

Mr. *Walz.* I am a retired command Sergeant Major of the E-9, and as I was going to say, I am a member of many of your VSOs, and I sat out there on that side of the aisle, and spent many years making sure the people sitting here could hear, so I hear, trust me I hear.

But I wanted to congratulate you. They have chosen well, that is obvious. Your organization comes with impeccable credentials. You are an organization that has epitomized the ideas that this isn't a partisan issue, a bipartisan issue, or with Senator Sanders a tri-partisan issue, I guess. It is not that; it is a nonpartisan issue. And you so clearly emphasized that, so it goes to a bit of what I am going to ask.

First and foremost, when we come up with this budget, we decide in this country what we are going to do with the funding and how we are going to prioritize, that budget is a moral document. It reflects our values as a nation. And how it is divided up and where the money is put does reflect who we are as a people. And we need to be on guard against rhetoric that doesn't match action.

All of you have seen it. I tell you this because I am a retired Sergeant Major and I came directly from the high school classroom. This is the first office in my life, including class president, that I ever ran for. So I sat where you sit, and this is one I tried to get my mind around for an awful long time, and the question that I ask is when I look at these budgets and when I look at what happens, and I hear the rhetoric, and I see people like yourselves--and I would have to mention at this time a very close friend of mine, a past commander, Jim Searchley from Minnesota. He was smart enough to leave the snow. He is in Florida now, but we still claim him.

And when I see people and see what they are asking for, my question to you and to all of your members here, as a nation, how do we get to this point where we make any funding of the veterans' issues a partisan political issue? How did we get there? How do I see a budget coming from the Administration that at a time of war cuts funding for prosthetic research for our soldiers coming back? I, for the life of me, I cannot get my mind around how that happens. I cannot for the life of me figure out how people try to spin

this, or try and find the political angle on this.

And not echoing what Senator Sanders said, but I think the reality all of us know it is, there is enough money. It depends on how we prioritize it. And we have got to at some point quit talking about what side of our aisle is going to do, what the other side of the aisle is going to do, as you so clearly stated. And I would just like to know, what can we do to try and facilitate that, and what do you as the DAV try to--how do I articulate that it is simply wrong to not give the money that is deemed necessary by everyone that is involved in providing these services for prosthetic research? How do we articulate that? Because my constituents I think almost to a person would say "give them the money." But we never do.

And my question to you is that, well, I can pledge to, and my vote is one of many that we are going to do that. How do we get that across, then? How do we start healing this nation on this divide of partisanship when it comes to this issue?

Commander *Barton.* Well, I think that is exactly it. I think you need to bury the partisanship and be more

bipartisan. You need to work together. You need to decide for yourselves that veterans are a priority in this country. If it wasn't for veterans we wouldn't be here. We wouldn't have the freedom. We wouldn't enjoy this great country, this great nation, and all that we can do in it.

And you have that responsibility, and I know it is not an easy one either. I know you have to fight every inch of the way to get things accomplished. And you are just the committees. You have got a Congress, you have got a Senate to deal with. But we have got to get beyond the partisanship, we have got to work together. As I say, we are all Americans, we are all in it together. I think that is the way you get it accomplished.

The *Chairman.* Do you yield back, Mr. Walz? Are you completed?

Mr. *Walz.* I am good, thank you.

The *Chairman.* Yes, you are very good. Mr. Bilirakis from Florida?

Mr. *Bilirakis.* Thank you Mr. Chairman. I am very pleased to be participating in my first hearing between the House and the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee. What an

honor to advocate on behalf of our true American heroes.

A large number of veterans call Florida home, and this is one reason why I specifically requested membership on the House Veterans' Committee. I wanted to serve as an advocate, as I said, in Congress for the brave men and women who answered the nation's call to duty, and it is my privilege to be here to work with you today.

The most first pieces of legislation that I introduced in January was H.R. 303, the Retired Pay Restoration Act as you probably know, my father, Mike Bilirakis championed this legislation in the Congress for the last 20 years. It is an honor for me to be able to continue his work on the concurrent receipt issue in the 110th Congress.

Commander Barton, I was very pleased to read in your testimony that the concurrent receipt issue remains one of the DAV's legislative priorities for the 110th Congress. I look forward to working with you and your fellow DAV members on this important issue. I was also pleased to see that your organization supports the expansion of the POW presumptions. It may interest you to know that I will be introducing the POW benefits act this week. If enacted, this bill will

establish service-connected presumptions for type-2 diabetes and osteoporosis for former POWs.

I think I got my answer, but I was hoping that the DAV would consider supporting this legislation. I also wanted to let you know--and your members--that I instructed my staff to add me as a cosponsor to H.R. 634, the American Veterans Disabled for Life Commemorative Coin Act. I think this is a worthwhile endeavor that deserves Congress's support.

Before I close, I would like to take a moment to recognize some Floridians who traveled to Washington for today's hearing. State Commander John Haynes, Al Linden, Andy Marshall, who is a constituent of mine, Carlos Rainwater, and Jim Sursily. Tim, your loss is our gain. Dennis Joyner, Frank Tracy, John Kellat, David Stone, Angel Rivera, and Phil Condon.

Commander Barton, I look forward to working with you, the DAV, members of Veterans' Affairs Committee, and other Veterans' Service Organizations on all matters of importance to our veterans.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, I appreciate it very much.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Mr. Bilirakis.

Mr. Hare from Illinois, followed by Mr. Hall.

Mr. *Hare.* Thank you Mr. Chairman.

Commander, thank you for coming today, and thanks to all of you. It is a wonderful turnout. I am a freshman on this Committee. As you probably know, I took over for Congressman Lane Evans and I did not have the rank that my friend Representative Walz had. I was in E-6, so he still bosses me around on the floor periodically.

Let me just say something to you. I sat at a hearing the other day in amazement. We were talking about this question of, "Can we afford things?" and we were debating or talking about the Filipino Veterans' Relief Bill. And in essence, what it was is 61 years of promises, 250,000--now only 22,000 living. I believe the Chairman said that the cost for that for a 10-year period was going to run around 750 million or whatever, a billions dollars. One of my friends across the aisle of said "Well, can we afford this?"

And I sat, and I took some notes, and I looked at this and I thought, \$200 a month for Filipino veterans who fought side-by-side with our troops, 61 years we made a promise and we didn't keep it. Now, in heaven's name, can you ask a

question, can we afford it? The statement should be "Can we simply afford not to do that?" It is what we promised, and this country doesn't keep its promises. It is not keep its promises to 600,000 veterans who were disabled, and their claims are waiting. And you know, you referred to it as disgraceful. I can't understand how we have ever entered into that.

Let me just suggest this to you, as a lowly freshman here, I am tired of hearing "can we afford it." I am going to work very hard from my little freshman end of this Committee--and by the way we have a wonderful Chairman--I want to fully fund VA healthcare for every veteran in this country.

I don't ever want to have to come back and I don't want somebody asking me "where are we going to find the money?" See, to me it is not the question of whether you are a Democrat or a Republican or a Socialist. It is a question of what is right and what is wrong. And we have been woeful, woefully late in doing this. I am tired of hearing stories about Walter Reed, and the treatment that veterans get. And not on our watch any longer, Commander, not on our watch. You need to keep our feet to the fire. And trust me when I

tell you, you have one freshman here from Illinois with a very big mouth.

But I can't thank you enough for everything you do, and everybody in this room, and what you have done. Let me just say that from a bipartisan perspective, Representative Kirk and I have introduced legislation on the DAV Memorial, on the grounds, to make those permanent, so we don't have a go back and revisit that. I am a cosponsor of H.R. 634.

But we have to do a lot more. And I think, to be quite honest, I looked at this budget, and I just could not--I remember talking to Representative Michaud--I kept looking at it, thinking, how can you cut prosthetic funding for veterans in a budget? I mean, what was the thinking and the logic behind it? And I can't seem to find any. So let me just suggest this to you. I would love to work with your organization and with your members here. We have an obligation. This is a promise we made and it is a promise we are going to keep. I am not leaving the seat until we keep the promise. I don't know how long I am going to be here, but I am not moving until we get this thing done.

So I just wanted to ask you from your perspective, what

do you think is the best way to get this message out?

Because candidly, I had some people tell me, "You are on the Veteran's Affairs Committee? That is really what you would not call your most glamorous Committee."

I said "It was the first Committee I wanted to get on." And I think that is part of the problem that I see here. So from your perspective I would be interested in terms of what you think we can do better than what we have been doing, in terms of being able to get the word out for veterans? Because I talked about this fully funding. I have outpatient clinics in my district and you know, we are going to have a budget that makes sense for veterans. But how can you help us out a little bit more, I guess is what I would like to know from you?

Commander *Barton.* I think the best thing you can do for your veterans is make sure they are taken care of. The word will get out. You don't need to publicize it. They will know it. When they go to that VA hospital and they can get in immediately and see a doctor, and be treated, when they file that claim and that they have a decision in 30 days, and they have a check to take care of them, they will

see it. And they will appreciate it. That is how you get it done.

Mr. *Hare.* Commander, I just want to close by saying that starting today, I mean, I am fairly new here after eight weeks, but starting today we are going to move down that road, and we will get it done. I promise you that. Thank you, I yield back.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Mr. Hare. The Chairman of our Disability Benefits Committee, Mr. Hall from New York, who I probably think knows John Mellencamp. Is that so?

Mr. *Hall.* I have met him. Thank you Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Commander Barton and all of your wonderful staff for being here, and all the members, and I want to welcome you and thank you all for your service in our country; for your active service, and your service since then to your fellow servicemen and women.

I just returned from, as did we all, from our districts. We were home for the district work break, and during that time I met with a number of veterans' groups in the 19th District of New York, including hospitalized veterans at Montrose and Castlepoint VA facilities, and had an

opportunity to discuss with them and the staffs of the two hospitals what works and what doesn't and how we can make it better.

And I also had a five-hour tour at the West Point United States Military Academy at West Point, which is in my district, where my father-in-law is buried, where my brother-in-law is a lieutenant colonel retired, who still works there. And I had lunch with all the cadets from my district, included my nephew who is a plebe.

And it was an amazing thing. They had the counter-terrorism staff give me a briefing that lasted about an hour and a half. And interestingly enough, our honorable Ranking Member might be interested to know that in an hour and a half of talking about the hottest nexuses of communications in the terrorist world right now in the Islamic Jihadist world, as graphed by a combination of military and civilian research team, based on who the authors, and who the websites, with the e-mails and the communications and contacts are going between; the word "Iraq" never came up. It was my brother-in-law, the lieutenant colonel, who pointed that out.

But that is just a little side note by way of saying

that, you know, there are differences of opinion in terms of a particular war or particular policy, but that does not mean for a second that there's a difference of opinion, I believe, on this Committee, and I think really in the country as a whole, about the support that we should give to our veterans, and to the troops in the field, as well as to our veterans after they come home.

And Commander Barton, I agree with your statement that you and your colleagues have paid already with your blood and your sacrifice, and the sacrifices of your families, and that whether it is a fee to buy into the system, or it is a \$8 to \$15 increase in co-pays, or whether it is attorney's fees that you know--my feeling about it is that the price of admission has already been paid. And we, as a country, can afford to pay whatever it takes to get you the rest of the way.

I want to ask you just a couple questions. Is the DAV aware of any--specifically regarding Walter Reed, any VA efforts to provide information to injured servicemembers who are beginning their transition to VA healthcare? And what would you suggest, or do the staff suggest, nationwide and

throughout the system, in terms of making that handoff better, and the transition better from DoD care to Veterans' Affairs system?

Commander *Barton.* I am going to let our staff handle that, because they deal with those issues every day in the work they do through the NSO court.

Mr. *Gorman.* Mr. Hall, the VA does have an active program on at Walter Reed where they have full-time employees out there, social workers and others--and the counselors--to make these folks aware of the benefits that are available from the VA, how to access the system, and they have a program there called--although I think it's a misnomer--"seamless transition" from DoD into the VA system.

I think obviously a lot of these folks fall through the cracks. One big thing that would help I think is the active and cooperative sharing of information from DoD to VA so that the VA, who is there, completely willing and able to take that handoff of these military members into the veterans' community are able to know the information, know what kind of treatment needs to be provided, where these service members are, in a timely manner so they can get into the VA system.

I Would also add the DAV has a full-time employee stationed at Walter Reed who also canvases the wards out there, talks to them, its outpatients, making them aware of DAV of course, but also that there is something called the Department of Veterans' Affairs out there for them, to avail themselves of--not only to servicemembers, but also the family members.

But a lot more needs to be done in the form of seamless transition. I think that goes a long way toward the cooperation of DoD, being able to work with and being willing to work with VA, to make that happen.

Mr. *Hall.* Thank you. I have heard in the district from veterans there that they agreed with your suggestion of the active, cooperative sharing of information, there are privacy requirements on both sides already, so there shouldn't be a question of privacy in their handing information from one to the other.

I am wondering also, an idea that has been kicked around on our Committee, and I would say that the disability benefits and Memorial Services Subcommittee, a top priority is getting rid of the 600,000 backlog of claims, and we do consider it to be a disgrace and a scandal that we shouldn't

tolerate.

So with that in mind, do you think that there is a component of that? And if so how much of that may be technological and not just hiring more people? I am just asking, are you aware of a technological problem that is to be fixed as well as hiring more people?

Mr. *Gorman.* Well, I think it is more to the point, not so much of an IT problem that needs to be fixed so much as an IT solution that needs to be implemented. They are doing some things with technology, but there is also programs out there and companies out there who are offering to VA programs that will help them to take a paper record, reduce it to an electronic record with things in there that assembles, organizes, chronicles medical records. Not only from the day of your induction exam into the military all the way through your discharge exam, but private medical treatment records, VA treatment records. It puts those in a table of contents where the VA rating specialist would not have to go through reams of paper to be able to find something, with a good chance of missing something. It would all be there electronically for them.

The VA is looking at right now. I don't think they are close to coming to a conclusion of whether they can use it or whether they want to use it as of yet, however. But it certainly is available for them, and I think it would be a great help.

Mr. *Hall.* Well, maybe we should do something like that before we build the new--not all this Committee, but you know, the new \$4.8 billion next-generation air-traffic control system or some other big-ticket item that we are considering right now in this budget, even as we are being told that we can't afford full funding for veterans' healthcare.

The *Chairman.* Mr. Hall, I have to ask you to conclude.

Mr. *Hall.* Yes, I will. I just wanted to ask if the DAV has an official position, Commander Barton, on the proposed cuts in the President's budget for prosthetic research?

Mr. *Gorman.* We do. I think we are asking--the Independent Budget is somewhere in the vicinity of an additional 30 billion over the Presidents request. But I

will have to check that figure and get it to you.

Mr. *Hall.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The *Chairman.* 30 billion, did you say? You didn't mean 30 billion, did you?

Mr. *Gorman.* 30 million.

The *Chairman.* Okay. The chair of our subcommittee on oversight investigations, Mr. Mitchell from Arizona.

19.31.21Mr. *Mitchell.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And Commander Barton, I cannot tell you how impressed I am with your forceful and articulate presence here today, with all of your supporters here. And I wanted to tell you how proud I am to be the Chairman of the oversight and investigations Committee. And I have heard some of the comments here about training, funding, and resources. But I think probably the most important of all of these--you can have all the training, the resources, and funding, but you have got to have accountability. And hopefully we will be able to do that through this Committee, and I am very proud to be in that position.

You know, I think we have to look at the procedures and the processes even though we have, let's say funding and

resources, because the procedures and processes must be there for what is best for the veteran; not for the administration, not for the bureaucracy. And I think that is an important part of what we should be doing.

I also wanted to let you know that there is an old story about President Roosevelt after a group of people came to visit President Roosevelt, and he said as he left, he said "well, you have convinced me. Now go put the heat on me."

And I think that probably one of the best ways that you and your organization can get achieve what you need to achieve is to go home to your chapters and to your individual congressmen and senators and put the heat on people. Thank you and I yield back my time.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Mr. Mitchell. I appreciate that. Another great hero of America, Senator Webb from Virginia. Thank you for being here, Senator.

Senator *Webb.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and it is a great pleasure to be over here. I would first like to say that I spent a number of years--spent four years as a minority counsel on the House Veterans' Committee. I remember this room. There were a lot of meetings like this

in this room, which I understand have not taken place for a while, but we had some great people on the Veterans' Committee 30 years ago, when I first started working up here as the first Vietnam veteran to serve as a full Committee counsel. And it is a great feeling to look out and see all these people from the DAV here today.

Commander Barton, fellow Marine Barton, I was reading in your bio, you were in the third Battalion 26th Marines. I want to report to you that when I arrived in Vietnam as a member of the first Battalion, fifth Marines, your Battalion was in the Arizona Valley, where I was operating, an operation called "Taylor Common," they were still fighting hard. I have tremendous regard for members of that Battalion, and for your own service, sir.

I also would like to say that I sit here as a life member of the DAV. I have been a life member of this organization for 30 years, more than 30 years. And that the individual who is handling my work in the veterans' area on my staff, Matt McGarvey, also is a life member of the DAV, and it is a higher arm amputee as a Marine in Vietnam, and in fact, he served in my platoon. And more importantly for the

work at hand, was the director of prosthetics at the VA hospital in Nashville for many years, so you will be well taken care of, I guarantee.

This is a unique organization. There is no veterans' organization that does more for the interests of our veterans than the DAV, and I would like to--because something has been said here, I want to clarify my own feelings about this. I don't believe that it is appropriate for our political leaders to claim to speak politically on behalf of those who serve in our military. I come from a family with a long military tradition. And I know that people who serve their country rarely serve because of politics. They serve because they love their country. They serve because they love the comradely of being in the military. They serve because they have family traditions.

And it is not really appropriate, I don't think, in a group like this to start talking about the political views of our troops. There's plenty of data that shows the concern that people in uniform have about the conduct of this war. This just isn't the place to be talking about that directly. And particularly the DAV. This is the one major veterans'

organization that checks of politics at the door when it comes in, and tries to take care of those who have served regardless of the political situation.

I am very familiar with the history of this organization. I will say to you, when I left the Marine Corps and got my papers and drove over to the VA regional office in Washington, D.C., the first person to grab me was an individual named Ron Draugt, who was a DAV service officer. I see a lot of people nodding their heads and smiling. He later became a specialist in labor. But that he grabbed me, signed me up for the DAV, and walked me through what I needed to know in order to file my claims with the VA; very importantly, the first day over there, he was the one who showed me through.

When I started working on this Committee, on the Veterans' Committee, my mentor, John Holden was an individual who--World War II veteran, who had come through the DAV National Service Officer program after World War II and taught me, in a way that I think people would be benefited by today, how this title 38 process works, and what its intentions really are.

And Commander, I know you saw me stand up and applaud when you talked about this provision on attorney fees. I have got 30 years of working in this area, some of it pro bono just as you. You know, I am an attorney. I have done thousands of hours of work for veterans. I don't think there is anything wrong with an attorney doing work for veterans. I think there is plenty wrong when people want to get a fee for it.

And I note in the testimony, that last year the Disabled American Veterans represented, free of charge, more than 188,000 veterans and their families, in claims and obtaining for them more than \$2 billion in benefits. And something that a lot of people don't understand when they are going out and hiring attorneys, however well-intentioned they are, is that peoples like the DAV service officers are trained in title 38. They have mastered title 38. They don't waste anybody's time, and they don't go into these claims process as adversaries. They go in working with the claims people and with our veterans. I think that is a very valuable thing, and I just fully agree with you that we are in danger with our system if we lose that perspective.

I will say one other thing. It was a great pleasure for me to have been selected to be on the Veterans' Committee on the Senate side. I asked to be on this Committee. I am very proud of the service of everyone in this room and I rarely mention this because sometimes it gets me in trouble, but I am very proud of my son's service. He is with the first Battalion sixth Marines in Iraq, right now.

I mentioned during the campaign that--Semper Fi, buddy. I mentioned during the campaign that if I were elected, those who are serving and those who have served will have no greater friend in the United States Congress, and I pledge to you I am going to live up to that. Thank you very much.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Senator. I had wondered how you won the election in Virginia, but now I see why. So we look forward to working with you.

Mr. *Mitchell.* I am tempted to respond, but I am not going to. I will just leave it at that.

The *Chairman.* I will tell the audience that you are here at a joint Committee hearing, which is fairly rare in our Congress, and we don't often have senators and House members working together, but I will tell you we are honored

by your presence and we are looking forward to working with all the senators who are here today.

And I would like to recognize also a new senator, one who has served in the House for 14 years, and we miss very greatly, but we are glad you are in the Senate. Senator Brown from Ohio.

Senator *Brown of Ohio.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I thought after 14 years in the House, coming back as a senator, I could get on the top row, but you know how it is. But everything is by the time you are right, so--

I very much thank Chairman Filner for his terrific work advocating for veterans. And Commander Barton, thank you for your comments today and your years and years of service to our country, and service to our veterans. Thank you so much for that.

Many of you know that 87 years ago, in the city of Cincinnati in my home State of Ohio, a gentleman by the name of Robert Marx saw that the great war's returning doughboys were not treated very well, and he got a group of others together. They formed a group in those days called the Disabled American Veterans of the World War. And within a

year, 250 veterans in the Cincinnati area came together and started the DAV. And so I am so proud to claim that in my State, and I have so proud of what you do, and the fact that you not only have served your country so well, but are continuing to serve your country by being active members of the DAV, and actively enough to give up your time and dollars in many cases to come here and continue to fight for all your fellow men and women. So thank you for all of that.

As senator Webb, I asked to be on this Committee, too, because I have watched--particularly in the last five years-- it was not on the House Veterans Affairs Committee. And The day I got to the Senate I asked Senator Reid, the Democratic leader to put me on this Committee. But I have watched for the last many years, what has happened increasingly to veterans, especially since the beginning of the Iraq war. Soon after the Iraq war began, four years or so ago, three and a half years or so ago, I began to meet with families around my congressional district in northern Ohio, and repeatedly saw that our government simply wasn't taking care of our troops well enough, wasn't providing the body armor, wasn't up-armoring the Humvees.

And we are now seeing, with this escalation of the war, we are seeing it again. We are still not providing the kinds of body armor, the protection for our troops, the equipment for our National Guard to train, the equipment they need in Iraq. We are seeing that we are continuing--even though we know the V-bottom vehicles are so much safer than the flat-bottom vehicles, we are still sending troops into battle with less than optimal equipment.

And that I see, as I watch this, as we all want this, what is happening to veterans when they get home, whether it is the 600,000 backlog, whether it is the continued efforts to increase the co-pay for prescription drugs, whether it is the cutback on prosthetic devices. On issue after issue after issue, when caring for veterans, when I go to the Cleveland VA at Wade Park, or go to the VA in Brecksville, or anywhere around Ohio; as good as the care is, as Mr. Gorman said, there is clearly not enough money to do what we ought to be doing.

And then I come to this city, and I listen to people defending the budget, defending what we have done and they just sit back and they say we have increased spending on

veterans. Yeah, we have, but there is this war going on and we know how expensive it is, and we know that they need not just to take care of veterans today and tomorrow at Walter Reed, and all over our country at VA clinics and at VA hospitals, but we also understand that this is a 50-year commitment. Many of you served this country in the armed forces 50 or so years ago, at least 50 years ago in some cases, and we simply aren't ready, because we simply have not looked forward enough.

Not only what we are doing for veterans today, but what we are not doing planning for the next 50 years. Whether it is physical disabilities or psychological disabilities. And nobody, in spite of the people saying "we are putting more money into the veterans," they clearly are not doing what we ought to do.

Today, that was brought home to me when Commander Morton, who is from Ohio, the Ohio Commander, and he brought with him Mr. Williams and Mr. James, and Mr. Burch, Mr. Johnston, and Mr. Brown, and they talked to me about mandatory funding, and what that would mean for veterans in our country.

And I would like to ask my one simple question of Commander Barton and Mr. Gorman. Specifically, tell us what mandatory funding would meet--if you have some estimates of the number of dollars and more importantly, what it would mean to veterans at the VA clinics, at the hospitals, veterans that are outpatient, just talk to us for a moment about what it would mean.

Commander *Barton.* I am going to let Executive Director Gorman handle that because he is more familiar with those details.

Mr. *Gorman.* Thank you, Senator. Let me start--and I am going to defer to Mr. Violante for some numbers. When we are talking about assured funding, we are not talking about all of the Veterans Health Administration, I don't believe. I think DAV is talking about medical care services. We are not talking about construction. We are not talking about research. We are not talking about medical administration. We are talking purely about the money that goes into the VA healthcare system for medical services being provided to disabled veterans.

So I think that distinction needs to be made. I am

going to let Mr. Violante, if he will, try to respond to the numbers for you.

Mr. Violante. Thank you. Senator Brown, the bills that have been introduced on mandatory funding in the past have used a formula. And the formula was, I think it was a 130 percent increase built in two years down the road. VA would get 130 percent of what the current funding level was. After that there would be a per-capita basis. And that would be the number of veterans who were enrolled in the process, divided by the appropriations to get the per-capita amount. And then each year you would have the cost of living adjustment added into that.

So it insures several things: number one, that all veterans who come to the system are counted, and VA receives a per capita basis for those individuals who are seeking care. It also builds in the cost-of-living adjustment, and more importantly is the fact that it allows VA to receive money on October 1st, regardless of where the budget process is.

And another point is that it is based on those figures as of I think it was July 1, which means that VA knows well

in advance what those appropriations are going to be on October 1st, if it allows them to plan for the future. The interesting thing is, and I think according to Senator Akaka's staff, they are going to be asking CBO to run a couple of different scenarios on that formula. And that is, you know, using as the prior legislation has done, the enrollees also using the uniques, those veterans who are actually in the system and using it, to see what the difference in those formulas might be. My staff has run the numbers as if the legislation had passed in the year 2000, and under every scenario, VA is ahead of where their appropriations were for the particular year. So we believe that the formula that is there would provide VA with the adequate level of funding to care for all of those veterans who come to the system.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Senator. I will recognize Congressman Buyer for a two-minute closing statements, and we will end the hearing.

Mr. *Buyer.* Thank you. I would like to say this: it would be in error, Commander, for you to leave this room today and think that they prism through which we define

issues is through a political prism. That would be an error. What you don't get to see, or America doesn't get to see is all the times when we are in agreement. You only get to see what we are in disagreement over something. So you never got to see when Chairman Filner and I were in total solidarity with this Committee in opposition to an Independent Budget that wanted us to centralize the IT system and work on cyber security. So, seven years ago when I started working on all those issues, "Oh, there is crazy Buyer, out there working on those IT cyber security issues." Wasn't so crazy after all.

So in solidarity you don't see that. Or what Mr. Michaud and I--who is not here--and Mr. Brown, working on new ideas on how to build a health facility. So I just want you to know that there are a lot of things that we work in solidarity across party lines here.

The other is, I was at Andersonville, the prison from the Civil War. And when I was there, there were about, I think 12 national cemeteries that are in the Department of the Interior. And there are two of these national cemeteries of whom veterans are being buried; Andersonville in Georgia, and Little Bighorn. I was disappointed with what I saw in

the condition of that cemetery. So with regard to how we fund the National Shrine Program, I think the National Monuments Commission does a wonderful job--I mean, they set the level, and we are trying to now increase those. I would like to work with the DAV, because I am going to take this one on to bring standards of the Department of the Interior up to the standards for which these sacred and honored brave should go, and I will work with the Chairman to do that.

The last point, is on the House floor today we recognized the Medal of Honor Day, which will be March 25th. We did it in a bipartisan fashion, and we have used Teddy Roosevelt's name here a lot today. So I am going to end with a bit of trivia for you that you can take home.

Paul McHale, who is a Democrat colleague of ours years ago, came to me and said "Do you realize that Teddy Roosevelt had been nominated for the Medal of Honor, but it was never ordered to him?"

And I said "No, I didn't realize that at all." As a matter of fact, Teddy Roosevelt meant so much to him, and he was bothered that some of his Roughriders didn't get the medal of honor that when he became President, he made sure

that his Roughriders, who were of the reserve components, got their medals of honor. And he did that.

And I then said, "Well, gosh, I guess it is a century late, but his paperwork must still be sitting at the Pentagon," because on that day at the battlefield, Colonel Leonard Wood--remember Fort Leonard Wood--and Major General Schaftner--of Fort Schaftner--both of these men were on the battlefield in Cuba. Colonel Leonard Wood was a doctor. Schaftner, a Major General, got his medal of honor from the Civil War. Schaftner got his from the Indian war. Never in the history of the United States have two men who wore the Medal of Honor witnessed something on the battlefield on that day, nominated someone else for the medal of honor, and he never got it.

And I close with this: Tweed Roosevelt--I met with Tweed, and I said "I am going to go through all of this, and I will do this for you because I think we need to right the wrong." But here is what I am going to ask for you. When the Roosevelt Association--you take this medal, you can go, you can show it unto the world. But I am going to ask that you give that medal of honor to the White House so it can sit

in the Roosevelt Room, on the opposite end where he received the Nobel Peace Prize, so that some future president, of whom will be challenged in a very difficult decision between war and peace, can say to that president and to world leaders that "You are not alone."

I yield back.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Mr. Buyer. Commander, we have learned a lot from you today. Your eloquence has moved us all, and I think has re-committed us to the battle that you defined.

And I want to say to the membership, thank you for electing such a powerful advocate. But I also say to the membership, you have got a lot of work to do back home. The way our system works, you have got to get in the face of all of us. We have got to be clear about what we ask for, but you have got to be there. Barely more than 100 members of Congress have had military service. I am one of those who haven't. And it doesn't mean we are evil. We just don't have the experience and we have to learn it. And you have to teach us.

So please teach the other members of Congress, whoever

your member of Congress is. Don't assume they know what the benefit packages are. Don't assume they know what concurrent receipt means. Don't assume they know what the backlog of claims is. You have got to educate. And if you educate this Committee in a bipartisan way, we will be able to do our job.

So Commander, thank you. You have confirmed for us, I think, the decision to restart these joint committees, these joint hearings. we have learned tremendously from you and I think your membership has a lot to be proud of.

This hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:11 p.m. the hearing was adjourned.]