

Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA)

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
HEARING ON THE VA BUDGET REQUEST FOR FY2009

IAVA TESTIMONY

Mr. Chairman and members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and our tens of thousands of members nationwide, I thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the VA budget request for 2009.

From April 2003-February 2004, I served as a First Lieutenant and Infantry Platoon Leader in Iraq. When I returned home, I quickly became concerned about the lack of real support for returning troops and veterans. In the early years of the wars, issues like Traumatic Brain Injury, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and homelessness received far too little attention.

But times have changed. Last year, this Congress showed tremendous commitment to our nation's veterans, providing the VA with its single largest budget increase in 77 years. On behalf of the millions of veterans who rely on VA health care, including almost 300,000 troops newly home from Iraq and Afghanistan, we hope you will continue to show your support for veterans' health care. IAVA is one of the over 60 organizations who have endorsed the Independent Budget, and we endorse it again for FY2009.

As the war in Iraq continues into its fifth year, this generation of troops and veterans faces new and unique problems. Today, IAVA is releasing our annual Legislative Agenda. Our Legislative Agenda covers the entire warfighting cycle - before, during and after deployment - and outlines practical solutions to the most pressing problems facing Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. Our Legislative Agenda is available at IAVA's website, www.iava.org.

The cornerstone of our 2008 Legislation Agenda is a new GI Bill. After World War II, nearly eight million servicemembers took advantage of GI Bill education benefits. A veteran of WWII was entitled to free tuition, books and a living stipend that completely covered the cost of education.

Today we have the opportunity to renew our social contract with our servicemen and women, and help rebuild our military. IAVA supports reinstating a World War II-style GI Bill that will cover the true cost of education and will fairly reward all combat veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. We have endorsed S. 22.

Critics have said the GI Bill is too expensive. The fact is, a new GI Bill is a bargain. The current GI Bill cost the Veterans' Affairs Department \$1.6 billion in 2004. Even if a World War II-style GI Bill were to double that cost, it would be about what we spend in a week in the War on Terror. And the GI Bill is more than a veterans' benefit. It is also an effective tool to stimulate the economy and to improve military readiness.

The GI Bill helped rebuild this country's economy after World War II. A 1988 Congressional study proved that every dollar spent on educational benefits under the original GI Bill added

seven dollars to the national economy in terms of productivity, consumer spending and tax revenue.

Many of our nation's leaders got their start thanks to the GI Bill, including Presidents Gerald Ford, George H.W. Bush, and Senators Bob Dole, George McGovern, and Pat Moynihan. The GI Bill also educated 14 Nobel Prize winners and two dozen Pulitzer Prize winners, including authors Joseph Heller, Norman Mailer, and Frank McCourt.

Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, however, receive only a fraction of the support offered to the Greatest Generation. For many, including my good friend Sgt. Todd Bowers, the burden of student loans and mounting debt can simply become too great.

When Sgt. Bowers was activated for his second deployment to Iraq, he was forced to withdraw from his classes at George Washington University, racking up an extra semester's debt without receiving credit for his coursework. While he was deployed to Iraq, Bowers was wounded when a sniper's round penetrated his rifle scope and sent fragments into the left side of his face. He was awarded the Purple Heart and Navy Commendation medal with "V" device for Valor. But when Bowers returned home, he was not greeted as a hero by his university and credit lenders. His student loans had been sent to collection, and his credit rating was ruined. Struggling to keep up with payments, Bowers was eventually forced to leave school.

The GI Bill is also an important recruitment tool. For years, the military has been lowering recruitment standards and increasing bonuses. We now spend more than \$4 billion annually on recruitment, but we're still struggling to meet recruiting goals. The GI Bill is the military's single most effective recruitment tool; the number one reason civilians join the military is to get money for college. A new GI Bill, one that put college within reach of a new generation of veterans, would be a tremendous boon to recruitment and would help rebuild our military after years of war.

Above all, a World War II -style GI Bill would thank this generation of combat veterans for their service and their sacrifice. As President Roosevelt said in his signing statement to the original GI Bill: "[The GI Bill] gives emphatic notice to the men and women in our armed forces that the American people do not intend to let them down."

For all of these reasons, IAVA is calling for a new GI Bill to be funded in this year's budget.

Thank you for your time.

Respectfully Submitted,
Paul Rieckhoff
Executive Director
Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA)