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Veterans Day: Honoring Our Troops & Veterans

Each November all Americans stop to remember the veterans who have served our country by making great sacrifices for the cause of freedom. The debt of gratitude owed our veterans is immeasurable. Their sacrifices and those of our military families are freedom's foundation.

Indeed, without the brave efforts of all the soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines and their families, our country would not stand so boldly, shine so brightly and live so freely. Veterans Day is a reminder of what we owe 24 million veterans in America.

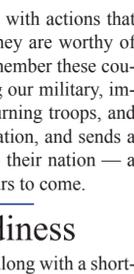
On this Veterans Day, we are engaged in hostilities where young men and women in uniform may have to pay the ultimate price in service to our country. Let us support and pay tribute to our courageous troops currently serving in Iraq, Afghanistan, and around the globe, who are the veterans of tomorrow. We honor the more than 3,800 Americans who have died in Iraq, as well as the 450 who have died in Afghanistan. We also honor the wounded: more than 28,000 U.S. troops in Iraq and more than 1,700 in Afghanistan.

In This Week's Issue:

- Veterans Day
- Military Readiness
- Troop Tax Relief
- Bush Veto Override
- Goldsboro Vet Event
- Natural Disaster Insurance
- Ed & Healthcare Investments

On behalf of our troops, our military readiness, and the American people, the 110th Congress is working to change course in Iraq. We are fighting to responsibly redeploy our troops out of Iraq, refocus on the real war on terrorism and rebuild our ability to deter and respond to threats to our nation anywhere on the globe.

This Veterans Day, we honor all of America's veterans with a GI Bill of Rights for the 21st Century. This is our promise to invest in veterans' health care and to strengthen benefits for our men and women in uniform today and for the veterans and military retirees who have already served. For too long, especially during a time of war, officials in Washington have neglected the needs of our troops and veterans.



To begin to fulfill that commitment, this Congress is on course to enact a veterans' spending bill that provides the largest increase in veterans' health care in our nation's history. This investment is in addition to the \$5.2 billion added earlier this year to strengthen health care for more than 5 million veterans. These are critical steps to the many veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Congress has also passed the Wounded Warriors Assistance Act to address the revelations of problems and gaps in care at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and other soldiers' and veterans' health care facilities.

The 110th Congress has made strengthening our great military and restoring their capability to protect us against threats throughout the world a top priority. To address the worst military readiness crisis since the Vietnam War, Congress is providing needed equipment and training for our troops.

Congress is also focusing on rebuilding the National Guard and Reserves, which has made an unprecedented commitment in the Iraq War, leaving our states and local communities vulnerable in the case of natural disasters. The new Congress is also strengthening force protection for our troops, including providing more body armor and better protected armored vehicles.

Congress is also keeping its promises to our troops and their survivors in the bipartisan Defense Appropriations bill we hope will become law soon. The measure increases military pay by 3.5 percent and helps the 60,000 survivors and widows of those who have died from service-connected injuries, who currently lose survivor benefits under the Military Families Tax. It also takes another step toward ending the Disabled Veterans Tax – expanding special compensation for combat-related disabled retirees who have served at least 15 years.

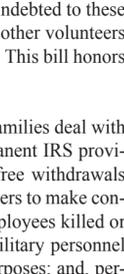
Politics and partisanship should never be a factor in how we support our veterans or troops. On the battlefield, the military pledges to leave no soldier behind. As a nation, let it be our pledge that when they return home, we leave no veteran behind.

Let us honor our veterans and troops for their service with actions that fulfill our commitment to them and their families – they are worthy of our grateful nation. We must celebrate, honor, and remember these courageous and faithful men and women by strengthening our military, improving veterans' health care to keep up with our returning troops, and giving our troops a pay raise. That is our moral obligation, and sends a message to Americans weighing a career in service to their nation — a message that will only make our nation stronger in years to come.

Addressing Military Readiness

Congress approved the annual Defense spending plan along with a short-term continuing resolution to responsibly fund the government through December 14th.

The House approved the conference report on the Department of Defense Appropriations for FY 2008, H.R. 3222, by a 400 to 15 vote. The bill strengthens America's defense by investing in equipment, training and cutting-edge weaponry, including body armor and vehicles proven to save lives in Iraq; restoring depleted equipment for the National Guard and Reserves; providing a 3.5 percent pay raise for troops; and, by strengthening health care for our wounded warriors returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.



The bill rejects President Bush's proposal to impose \$1.9 billion in TRI-CARE and premium increases on our troops and military retirees, and it invests in a series of initiatives to improve military health care, including fostering better coordination between the Defense Department and the Department of Veterans' Affairs, improving the Department's health record-keeping, enhancing preventative medicine programs, and advancing military medical research.

The bill also supports our troops at home by addressing the immediate need for more counselors, teachers and child care providers to help deal with the stresses of repeated and extended deployments. The bill also provides \$615.7 million needed to upgrade army facilities, including barracks, child care facilities and community services at bases throughout the U.S., Europe and Korea.



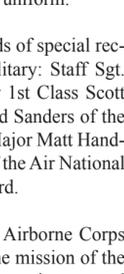
The legislation builds up the strained National Guard and Reserve by providing an additional \$980 million to purchase essential National Guard and Reserve equipment. This will ensure they have the equipment needed to meet overseas deployment demands and to respond to natural disasters here at home.

The bill also fully funds the personnel, equipment and training costs of increasing the Army by 7,000 troops and the Marine Corps by 5,000 troops. It also provides \$11.6 billion in emergency funding for Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles and increases funding for body armor and other protective equipment. MRAPs are needed to protect military personnel from improvised explosive devices, the number one killer of U.S. troops in Iraq.

The bill also fully supports the Army's evolution to a larger and more rapidly deployable force by providing \$925 million for additional Stryker vehicles and \$157 million for the procurement of four Joint Cargo Aircraft.

Other important aspects of the bill include the improvements to accountability and oversight of military contractors. The conference agreement provides funding for additional Inspector General staff to provide much needed oversight on Department of Defense (DoD) contract services. Further, the bill increases funding for defense contract management and oversight and reduces funding for contracted services by 2 percent across the board. From 2000 to 2005, DOD contracting-out increased by 73 percent, but oversight has actually decreased.

The bill also directs the Secretary of Defense to develop uniform standards for all DoD security contractors, and to establish a clear set of rules-of engagement for those contracted security personnel operating in both Iraq and Afghanistan. It also requires the DoD to include all funding for both non-war and war-related activities in the President's fiscal year 2009 annual Defense budget report.



Finally, the bill includes provisions restricting the establishment of permanent bases in Iraq and it prohibits the use of torture.

Also included is a continuing resolution that funds the federal government through December 14 at the FY 2007 spending level. This provides needed time to negotiate reasonable compromises on the appropriations bills without harmful cuts to critical priorities in homeland security, health care and law enforcement.

The resolution continues a temporary extension of the children's health (SCHIP) program, Food Stamps and Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) through December 14th. Additionally, the bill includes \$6.4 billion to meet time sensitive emergency domestic needs, including \$3 billion in emergency funding to meet the shortfall in Louisiana's Road Home program, which provides grants to help families rebuild homes destroyed by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita; \$2.9 billion for FEMA to replenish disaster relief; and, \$500 million to replenish federal firefighting programs.

Troop Tax Relief

The House this week approved a measure aimed at providing tax relief to the men and women of our nation's armed services as well as to others volunteering in service to America.

The House voted unanimously in favor of the, the Heroes Earnings Assistance and Relief Tax (HEART) Act of 2007, H.R. 3997. The \$2 billion in tax relief recognizes that America is perpetually indebted to these brave marines, soldiers and sailors, as well as all of the other volunteers who are our first line of defense in times of emergencies. This bill honors their service to keeping America safe.

The bill provides permanent tax relief to help military families deal with economic hardships. For example, the bill makes permanent IRS provisions to allow active duty reservists to make penalty-free withdrawals from retirement plans. The measure also permits employers to make contributions to a qualified retirement plan on behalf of employees killed or disabled in combat; counts extra pay for active duty military personnel from their previous civilian employer for retirement purposes; and, permits recipients of military death benefit gratuities to roll over the amounts received, tax-free, to a Roth IRA or an Education Savings Account.

The bill also includes tax benefits for other public servants who face risk, such as volunteer firefighters and Peace Corps volunteers. The bill clarifies that rebates of state and local taxes for volunteer firefighters and that reimbursements for expenses incurred in the line of duty by volunteer firefighters are not taxable.

Under the bill, thousands of veterans would also be eligible for low-interest loans by making permanent and modifying qualified mortgage bonds used to finance residences for veterans.

The bill is fully funded through increased penalties on corporations and partnerships that fail to file taxes.

House Overrides Bush Veto

The House overwhelmingly overturned President Bush's veto of legislation aimed at protecting Americans from natural disasters such as floods and hurricanes.

The veto of the Water Resource Development Act, H.R. 1495, was overturned by a vote of 361 to 54. The Senate overrode the bill by a vote of 79 to 14. It marks the first override of a President Bush veto.

The bill will allow for critical investments to protect communities from flooding by building and repairing floodwalls and levees, as well as restoring wetlands that absorb floodwaters.

Much of our nation's infrastructure is outdated and in some cases crumbling. This puts lives, property, and commerce at risk. The President argued that \$23 billion over 15 years is too much to invest on Hurricane Katrina recovery, flood control, navigation, hurricane protection, and environmental restoration across the country.

This bipartisan bill authorizes the Army Corps of Engineers to carry out flood control, navigation, beach erosion control and environmental restoration projects across the country.

This bill is essential for fulfilling the President's pledge to rebuild New Orleans "even better and stronger than before the storm." It contains the authority for the Corps of Engineers to raise and enhance flood protection levees surrounding New Orleans, improve the drainage canals that contributed to the flooding of New Orleans. It also directs the Corps to physically close the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet – a step essential to the protection of the Lower Ninth Ward and other neighborhoods.

The bill also includes dozens of beach erosion control projects that are designed to restore damaged beaches across the country. Hurricanes and tropical storms can erode beaches, which eliminates key natural defenses and, in time, can cause loss of life and extensive property damage.

The bill calls for a new independent peer review process for Corps of Engineers projects that have an estimated cost of \$45 million or more. Independent peer review would also be required for any projects, regardless of cost, if the Corps' Chief of Engineers deems them "controversial" or if a governor in a relevant state requests a review.

Additionally, the bill includes various provisions to increase oversight of the Corps of Engineers, including ensuring public access to water resources data and requiring the Secretary of the Army to prepare a set of wide-ranging accountability reports.

Goldsboro Military and Veterans Event

Nearly 300 people attended my Military and Veterans Informational Resource Expo and Appreciation Awards Luncheon last weekend.

It was a wonderful opportunity for veterans to make sure they know how to maximize all the benefits available to them. It also provided a great opportunity for us as Americans to take a moment to show some deserved appreciation to our veterans and our men and women in uniform.

It was an honor for me to present awards of special recognition to seven members of the military: Staff Sgt. Rashe Hall of the Army, Petty Officer 1st Class Scott Lawhe of the Navy, Staff Sgt. Cleveland Sanders of the Air Force, Cpl. Bethany Stancell of the Marine Corps, Major Matt Handley of the Army National Guard, Capt. Darryl Blevins of the Air National Guard and Petty Officer Scott Higgins of the Coast Guard.

Lt. Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, commander of the XVIII Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg, was the keynote speaker. He described the mission of the Marines and North Carolina's significance in fighting terrorism around the world. He pointed out that our state has the third largest military population in the country.

"It is clear North Carolina is a major contributor to our nation's defense," he said. "When the national leadership calls 911, the phone rings in North Carolina."

Lt. Gen. Austin urged the group to remember the fallen and their families in their prayers, adding that our country owes them a debt of gratitude.

The event included the presentation of colors, music, welcoming remarks by Goldsboro Mayor Al King. The day-long event was held at the Dillard-Goldsboro Alumni Cultural Center.

Ensuring Natural Disaster Insurance

The House this week approved bipartisan legislation addressing the growing crisis in the availability and affordability of homeowners' insurance.

The Homeowners Defense Act, H.R. 3355, focuses on stabilizing the catastrophe insurance market by expanding private industry's capacity to cover natural disasters and helping states to better manage risk.

The bill creates a Natural Catastrophe Risk Consortium, which provides a venue for state-sponsored reinsurance funds to voluntarily bundle their catastrophic risk with one another, and then transfer that risk to the private markets through the use of catastrophe bonds and reinsurance contracts. Following the risk transfer, state-sponsored reinsurance funds will be better protected and increasingly able to provide a stabilizing effect on the state insurance market.

This would decrease the need for government bailouts when a natural catastrophe hits. The bill is a responsible approach to the homeowners' insurance crisis which expands coverage and stabilizes the market. It would also help restore reliability and predictability to the homeowners' insurance industry by minimizing the price volatility in insurance following a large natural disaster.

The legislation also creates a National Homeowners' Insurance Stabilization Program within the Treasury Department to provide loans to state reinsurance programs in the event of a severe natural disaster. This would provide the capital needed to quickly begin the rebuilding process.

The provisions creating the federal loan program are designed to minimize the costs to taxpayers. Strict requirements would be placed on state reinsurance programs in order to qualify for the federal loans. In addition, loan terms and "penalty" rates are designed so that the federal government would be the lender of last resort.

Education and Health Care Investments

The House approved bipartisan legislation that makes significant investments in health care and education.

The Labor-Health-Education Appropriations for 2008 bill was approved by a vote of 269 to 142 and now goes to the President.

This legislation rejects cuts proposed by President Bush in health care, education, job training, and home heating assistance. The increased funding over the President's request will significantly aid children in North Carolina.

In North Carolina, the legislation would provide funding for 236 more new teachers than the President's request and provides extra math and reading help to 3,052 more disadvantaged children. Additionally, the funding over the President's request in the bill would provide access to after-school programs for 3,323 more children.

The bill also makes the following critical investments in our future:

- Ensuring health care for 1.2 million more Americans through community health centers;
- Issuing nearly 1,400 more life-saving medical research grants than the President, to potentially find cures for cancer, stroke, diabetes, Alzheimers' and Parkinsons' disease, with new investments in NIH;
- Strengthening quality education for our children by training 51,000 more teachers;
- Increasing the maximum Pell Grant for college to \$4,925; and
- Helping 173,000 more adults, youth, and dislocated workers with job training and employment.

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