



The ALLIANCE



Volume 2 • Number 3

May - June 2006

Craig Joins With Sen. Burns On Veterans Funding

Largest Increase in Spending on Veterans In the History of the United States

U.S. Senator Larry Craig (R-Idaho), chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, joined with his colleagues recently in supporting an amendment offered by Sen. Conrad Burns (R-Montana) which would eliminate the need to enact a \$250 annual insurance premium and increased prescription drug co-pays for some veterans. Those items were sought by the Bush administration and would have only applied to veterans with no service-connected disabilities, and who have higher incomes.

The Burns amendment was adopted by a vote of 100-0, and now becomes part of Senate Concurrent Resolution 83 which sets targets on federal spending priorities.

"I am pleased that the VA budget is a top priority during debate on the budget resolution," Craig said. "On the other hand, I am sobered. Any way you cut it, the spending proposed for the FY07 budget will result in more than a 70 percent increase in VA's medical care budget since 2001. Today's vote represents the largest increase in spending on veterans in the history of the United States."

The amendment Craig

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AFTEA Supports Edwards-Jones Bill to Stop TRICARE Cost Increases



Rep. Chet Edwards



Rep. Walter Jones

The March-April edition of the *Alliance* contained a story about the Administration's proposals to increase or begin TRICARE enrollment fees, co-pays and deductibles for military retirees under age 65, and to raise certain pharmacy co-pays for all military retirees. AFTEA has been working together with other military associations to get Congress to block those proposals, and our efforts began to pay off in mid-March when Representatives Chet

Edwards (D-Tex) and Walter Jones (R-N.C.) introduced the Military Retirees' Health Care Protection Act. The Act would prevent any of the increases from going into effect and would take away DoD's ability to raise the fees through administrative action, requiring instead that Congressional action be taken before any increases could be instituted.

We participated in a press conference with the Congressmen when they unveiled their bill to the public and announced that they had already picked up 46 co-sponsors for their bill.

According to Chuck Partridge, Government Relations Representative, "Congressman Edwards and Jones are two of the best friends military personnel have in Congress and once

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Report from the Hill

Senate Holds Hearings On Tricare Fee Increase Proposal

"Military service to our country is far different from working for a company..." and the Department of Defense and the Congress must keep this in mind as we examine proposed changes to TRICARE and the Military Health System. Senator Lindsay Graham (R-SC), Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Personnel, expressed these sentiments and made that clear as he chaired a hearing on the Administration's proposal to impose huge additional fees on military retirees in the TRICARE

program. The March-April edition of the *Alliance* outlined the proposals and expressed AFTEA's strong opposition to this breach of faith with active duty and retired military personnel, their families and survivors.

In an earlier hearing, the Secretary of Defense stated that DoD health care costs have doubled over the past five years from \$19 billion to \$37 billion. In 2005, the DoD health budget was 7.6% of the total DoD budget; he estimated that by 2015 health care would be 12% of the DoD budget. He also stated that since there has been no change in TRICARE premiums in 11 years, the

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Albert G. Ybanez

The Defense Department's 2007 budget proposal and longer-range Quadrennial Defense Review ignores the lessons of the past, resulting in a budget that disregards present reality.

The new QDR reflects a view by the Pentagon that focuses on long-term dangers as though the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had never happened, as if America's ground forces were not badly overstretched, as if the nation were not really at war.

Faced with a budget that forced choices between costly weapon systems, first envisioned for war against the Soviets, and ground troops to fight war's like those in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Pentagon went for the hardware. The 2007 budget gives hardware higher priority than men and women in uniform.

By refusing to propose essential growth in the defense budget to fund strength increases even in this time of war, the Pentagon has forced choices about whether to prioritize the present or the future. And as this QDR shows, the Pentagon remains firm in its determination to organize for tomorrow's potential problems rather than today's

actual crises.

Although the Pentagon officially promises to "overmatch" any potential adversary, a military policy of "just barely enough" has been the reality.

The Pentagon's priorities also drive budgetary decisions relative to their obligations to retirees and veterans, as well as to the men and women in uniform today.

Proposals to shift more health care costs to retirees, sweeping changes to the retirement system, and underfunding the VA, all point to priorities that are misplaced during this time of war.

In this era of uncertainty and war, we realize more vividly how much our very freedoms rest on the courageous sacrifices of so many men and women throughout the course of our country's history.

Let us all pause on Memorial Day to honor and pay tribute to all the veterans who so bravely have served in our nation's armed services.

Harris Poll Shows Military Still Most-Admired U.S. Institution



Department of Defense

The military continues to be the most admired institution in America, according to a recent Harris Poll.

A total of 47 percent of Americans said they have a "great deal" of confidence in the military. Some 38 percent of Americans said they had "only some" confidence and 14 percent said they had "hardly any" confidence in the military.

The military was followed in the poll by small business - a new

category in 2005 - with 45 percent of Americans saying they had a great deal of confidence; 38 percent in colleges and universities, 33 percent in the Supreme Court, and 31 percent in Medicine.

At the bottom of the survey, released March 2, were law firms at 10 percent, Congress at 10 percent, organized labor at 12 percent, major companies at 13 percent and the press at 14 percent.

Anchoring the middle was organized religion at 30 percent, the White House at 25 percent, public schools at 22, the courts and justice system at 21, and television news at 19.

The military has done well in the poll since the mid-1980s. The first poll, conducted in 1966, had the military at 61 percent approval rating. The next poll, conducted in 1971 showed the

corrosive effect of the Vietnam War on America. Only 27 percent of Americans had confidence in the military then.

The public confidence in the military climbed after the 1970s and by 1989 the military was the most-trusted organization in the United States.

Harris Interactive, based in Rochester, N.Y., conducts the poll without sponsors. "We do this on our own," public relations coordinator Kelly Gullo said.

Gullo said Harris Interactive pollsters canvassed 1,016 U.S. adults via telephone. She said the sampling error for the survey is plus or minus 3 percent. 🌲

*from American Forces Press Service
by Jim Garamone*

House VA Committee Seeks Improved GI Benefit Bill for Guard & Reserve

With the goal to modernize the GI Bill, House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Steve Buyer (R-Ind) heard testimony recently from representatives of the National Guard and Reserves on education benefits for the total military force. Committee members were questioning whether the current GI Bill education and training programs are meeting the needs of service members and veterans transitioning back to civilian life and the workforce, as well as maintaining the recruiting and retention goals of both active duty and reserve forces.

“My vision of a modernized GI Bill is one that would address both national competitiveness and personal success issues by significantly increasing the number of veterans who use their benefits and that includes members of the National Guard and Reserves,” said Chairman Buyer.

Buyer announced his interest in modernizing the GI Bill at a hearing in February, where Secretary Nicholson presented the President’s Fiscal Year 2007 Budget. This was the first in a series of anticipated Committee hearings on the issue.

Buyer said his efforts to enact change must “meet two primary goals: first, make the GI Bill more flexible in the types of education and training available to all eligible veterans; second, to adjust the program to make it more usable for members of the National Guard and

Reserves while maintaining its value as a recruiting and retention tool.”

“Our Airmen deserve a benefit commensurate with their service in war,” said Lt. Gen. John A. Bradley, Chief of Air Force Reserve.

“We must work to ensure that returning service members, both active-duty and Reservists, receive educational and training benefits that reflect and correspond to the new realities which have transformed our nation’s military commitments since September 11, 2001,” said Rep. Stephanie Herseth (D-S.D.).

“They should not lose their education benefits following honorable service,” concluded Chairman Buyer.

Noting that the testimony of several senior officials declined to endorse a proposal put forward by the Partnership for Veterans Education, Buyer questioned the consistency of their testimony. “I don’t see their logic. On one hand, they oppose the Partnership’s proposal to retain education benefits after discharge on the ground that it would hurt retention. On the other hand, their own survey data shows that education benefits have little influence on a decision to reenlist,” said Buyer.

“We’re going to continue working with the stakeholders, but in the end, we need a better GI Bill that meets the needs of all those who wear the uniform and the needs of America’s economy,” concluded Buyer. 🇺🇸



AFTEA Supports Edwards-Jones Bill

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again they’ve demonstrated that fact to all the men and women who either have worn, or are now wearing, one of the uniforms of our nation’s Armed Services.”

Both Edwards and Jones stated how disappointed they were that the Administration would break faith with the men and women who willingly spent their careers safeguarding our nation. Congressman Jones warned the Bush Administration that “they had better get on our side or they are going to get embarrassed.”

And Congressman Edwards asked those gathered at the press conference to imagine what would happen if they had introduced a bill to tax only military retirees to help pay the government’s debt. Knowing that no such bill would

ever stand a chance of passing Congress, he stated that, in fact, that was the real effect of the DoD proposal.

Another speaker at the event noted that the proposals would actually have the effect of changing the character of the benefit from one of earned access to health care to one of having the opportunity to buy access to military health care which, in essence, changes the earned benefit into an insurance plan.

Both Congressmen, as well as other military retirees who spoke, pointed out that the proposals have serious negative consequences for recruiting and made absolutely no sense at all during a time of war, especially when the Army is having an extremely difficult time reaching its recruiting goals.

AFTEA is sincerely grateful to Congressmen Edwards and Jones and we pledge to go all out to help them make sure their bill is passed this year. 🇺🇸

Key Elected Officials Oppose Tricare Fee Increases

We report in another article in this issue of the *Alliance* about the Edwards-Jones bill that will, if passed, kill DoD's proposed increases in TRICARE for under-65 retirees. That bill in itself is good news, but it's not the only good news.

AFTEA has learned that other key Congressional members have gone on record in opposition to the proposals.

House Armed Services Committee Chairman Duncan Hunter (R-Calif) and the Committee's senior Democrat, Ike Skelton (D-Mo), recently sent a joint letter to Budget Committee Chairman Jim Nussle (R-Iowa) saying they don't support such increases and want more money in the defense budget to make up the shortfall in this and many other areas.

"The [Armed Services] committee believes that these proposals depend too exclusively on increasing cost shares and believes that no action

should be taken in Fiscal Year 2007 until a full review of additional cost control options is completed," the letter said. Hunter and Skelton also made it clear they're not happy that the Pentagon has already issued guidance to Tricare contractors to start implementing the fee increases. "Circumventing Congressional oversight by quickly implementing fundamental changes to a highly viable medical benefit is not keeping the promise to the sailors, soldiers, airmen and Marines that serve our country," they said.

This opposition from these key leaders is very important. AFTEA believes the tide has turned against the DoD proposals for this year. However, we will continue to fight to stop these outrageous increases for however long it takes. But it is critically important that AFTEA members contact their own U.S. Senators and their Representative and let him or her know that you are opposed. 🌲

Craig Joins With Sen. Burns On Veterans Funding

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supported adds \$823 million in spending to the approximately \$80 billion budget President Bush proposed for veterans in 2007.

Although he voted for passage of the Burns' amendment, Sen. Craig laid out his long-term concerns with federal spending on VA programs.

"I was left with a tough decision. Without enactment of the fees and increased co-pays proposed by the VA, the system needs an additional \$800 million-plus in funding. And at this time my colleagues are unwilling to accept the President's fee proposals. With that reality, I couldn't, in good conscience, vote to purposefully under fund VA medical care," Craig said. "Now we are on accelerated collision course with other federal spending priorities and I urge my colleagues to engage in a serious and candid dialogue about sustainability of this system."

The Burns amendment is budget neutral - and assumes that other federal programs will have to be cut in order to finance the \$823 million spending increase for veterans.

Craig noted that there are significant increases for important initiatives for veterans in the President's \$80 billion budget request for next year. Among those including an additional \$345 million for mental health services (including PTSD treatment), \$64 million for homeless programs, and another \$161 million in additional spending for prosthetics and sensory aids.

This decision by the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, when coupled with the actions of the House Veterans Affairs Committee reported elsewhere in this issue, all but kills the proposed increases for this year. 🌲

Election Of AFTEA Officers And Directors

This is a "call for candidate resumes" be submitted by interested members for positions on the AFTEA National Board of Directors (BOD). The election shall be held in September, 2006, by "mail-in" ballot. The following offices shall be filled:

President (for a term of 1-year). Candidates must have been a member in good standing for at least three consecutive years, and be currently serving on the National Board of Directors.

1st Vice President (for a term of 1-year). Candidates must have been a member in good standing for at least two consecutive years, and be currently serving on the National Board of Directors.

2nd Vice President (for a term of 1-year). Candidates must have been a member in good standing for at least two consecutive years, and be currently serving on the National

Board of Directors.

Directors (2): Must be members in good standing (two director positions shall be filled).

Secretary (for a term of 1-year). Candidates must be members in good standing, and have good writing skills.

Treasurer (for a term of 1-year). Candidates must be members in good standing, and have accounting knowledge and experience.

Members who wish to place their name in nomination for a position on the BOD must submit their qualifications to AFTEA on a "Resume of Candidate for Elective Office" form, postmarked no later than May 15, 2006.

The Resume of Candidate for Elective Office form may be downloaded from the AFTEA Web-site at <http://www.aftea.us>, or by calling Member Services at 800-808-4517, ext. 1010. 🌲

Committee Recommends Changes to Military Pay

A committee that's spent the past year studying the military compensation system is recommending sweeping changes that, if approved, would bring military compensation more on par with private-sector compensation.

The Defense Advisory Committee on Military Compensation is incorporating their proposals in a final report that was expected to go to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in late April, the committee chairman told the American Forces Press Service.

The proposed package includes two major ideas, retired Navy Adm. Donald Pilling, former Vice Chief of Naval Operations, explained. These include revamping the retirement system so service members receive more pay throughout their careers rather than at their completion, and basing pay on performance rather than longevity and other factors, he said.

Pilling emphasized that any proposed changes to the compensation package would be grandfathered in, so currently serving members would not be affected. The only exception could be in the case that current members are offered the opportunity to voluntarily "opt in" to the new system, he said.

In terms of retirement, the committee recommends:

- Vesting members at 10 rather than 20 years;

- Paying graduated retirement plans ranging from 25 percent of base pay at 10 years to 100 percent of base pay at 40 years;
- Establishing a Thrift Savings Plan with government contributions of 5 to 10 percent of base pay;
- Providing "gate pays" at specific service milestones, as determined by the individual services; and
- Delaying payment of the retirement annuity until age 60.
- In terms of pay for performance, the committee recommends:
- Revising the pay charts so pay is based on time in grade rather than years of service; and
- Eliminating the "with dependents" and "without dependents" provision of basic allowance for housing so all service members in the same pay grade receive the same allowance, regardless of their family situation.

If Rumsfeld approves the plan, it will be subject to congressional review before being introduced, he said.

AFTEA will have more to say on this issue in future issues of the *Alliance*. 🏠

information taken from American Forces Press Service by Donna Miles

Customers Alerted To Rise In Use Of Fraudulent Coupons



Be careful how you get your Internet coupons.

That's the word from Defense Commissary Agency officials who are alerting customers about a recent rise in the use of fraudulent Internet or home-printed coupons and steps the agency has taken to address the issue.

Commissaries gladly accept Internet or home-printed coupons provided they meet these requirements:

the coupons must have "dot-scan" bars below expiration dates or bar codes with Product Identification Numbers (PINs), and they can't be for free products. This is an expansion of acceptance criteria for home-printed coupons because counterfeit coupons have shown up recently in commissaries and other supermarkets nationwide. Officials are pointing to Internet trading as the source of the counterfeit coupons.

"Counterfeit coupons are circulating on the Internet through auction services, message boards, e-mails and other means causing millions of dollars in losses to the grocery industry," said Scott Simpson, DeCA's chief operating officer.

Fraudulent coupons presented recently at commissaries were for products ranging from laundry detergents, air fresheners and deli meats to sodas, chips and over-the-counter medications. Defining more stringent requirements for stores to

accept home-printed coupons is one phase of action the agency is taking to combat the problem. Educating customers about how to avoid getting taken by counterfeit coupons is the other phase, and it's been described as the best line of defense against possible fraud, Simpson said

People who purchase or trade coupons are inherently at risk of receiving counterfeit coupons, therefore customers shouldn't buy or trade for coupons. The sale or transfer of coupons is a violation of virtually all manufacturers' coupon redemption policies, according to the Coupon Information Center, a coupon industry watchdog. These policies are printed on the coupons

Customers can be assured they are not obtaining counterfeits if they get their coupons directly from newspapers or magazines, directly from a manufacturer or from some other

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Report from the Hill

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beneficiary cost share has gone from about 25% to 12%. These figures do not include the cost to the retiree of a supplement for TRICARE Standard. The supplement is essential because of earlier cuts in the benefit. What no one in the Administration is saying publicly is that this proposal continues to violate the promise of free lifetime health care used to recruit and retain a career military force. Further, we question the numbers used to justify the fees and have asked for a review.

In addition to Senator Graham, Senator Ben Nelson (D-NE), ranking Democrat on the Personnel Subcommittee and Senator Elizabeth Dole (R-NC), a member of the committee attended the hearing. Senator Nelson expressed concern over the increases and pointed out that free lifetime health care had been promised as an inducement to enlist and to serve a full career. He also stated that the 3-tier system of fees was not appropriate for widows. The witnesses from most of the military associations who were testifying expressed strong opposition to the proposed increases. They, and AFTEA, call for independent verification of DoD's estimates, a moratorium on changes until an independent review is conducted, challenge the 2 year phase-in of increases as too abrupt, and suggest other options for DoD to save

money in the medical system rather than on the backs of retirees.

Senator Graham stated that something must be done about health care costs, and that we must keep in mind the key role lifetime medical care plays in recruiting and retention, while looking at ways to reform the system and increase efficiency. He stated that we need a system that can be sustained over time. He believes that the system must be fixed on his watch and that the nation has neglected problems for too long. He asked the association witnesses to suggest agencies to do the independent review. They suggested the GAO (Government Accountability Office) or the Congressional Research Service (CRS).

AFTEA continues to support improvements and efficiencies that do not increase costs to beneficiaries. DoD has caused much of the problem by shutting down clinics and hospitals and reducing authorizations for uniformed services medical personnel: nurses, medical technicians and doctors. There are many procedures within the TRICARE system that can be improved and simplified to reduce costs. More can be done to reduce the cost of prescription drugs. In addition, many retirees are not aware of how much they can save themselves and the government by using the Pharmacy mail-order program rather than the

local retail pharmacy for maintenance drugs. There is a lot that can be done, but all of us must make sure we stop the effort to impose the outrageous fee increases. See also the *Alliance* article in this edition on the Edwards-Jones Bill, HR4949.

We ask every AFTEA member to call your two Senators and your Representative. If you have a cell phone with unlimited calling, the call will be free. You don't even have to know the names of your Senators and Congressman. Call the US Capitol switchboard at 202-224-3121. Tell the operator what state you are from and the Operator will connect you to your Senators. Tell the Capitol Operator your zip code and you will be connected to your Representative. Once connected, simply tell the Senators' staffers that you oppose the proposed fee increase for the DoD TRICARE medical program and ask them to oppose it. When you are connected to your Representatives' office, ask that he/she cosponsor HR 4949, the Edwards-Jones Bill to stop TRICARE cost increases. If they are already cosponsors, thank them. You can make a difference in this fight and we ask that you make those calls. 📞

*Chuck Partridge
Government Relations*

Customers Alerted To Rise In Use Of Fraudulent Coupons

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legitimate coupon channel, including Internet sites. Legitimate Internet coupons are featuring new dot-scan bars below their expiration dates. The dot-scan bars look like bar codes with broken bar patterns. Internet coupons also usually have PINs and bar codes, and they are not for free products.

Here are some tips to avoid possible counterfeit coupons:

- Look for the dot-scan bar below the expiration date on

Internet coupons. If they don't have a dot-scan bar, look for a PIN and bar code. Many now have both a dot-scan bar along with a PIN and bar code. Look out for coupons printed on photocopy, plain white, photographic or card stock and coupons with fuzzy images or misspelled words.

- Look out for unusually long expiration dates.

- Look out for coupons sent to you in electronic format by someone other than a manufacturer or its authorized representative.
- Look out for coupons with printing on only one side.
- Look out for multiple coupons for the same product with identical PINs. 📞

*By Rick Brink
Defense Commissary Agency*

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Dear Fellow Member,

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Help us reach out to other top non-commissioned officers. Please share AFTEA with a friend.

Use the Charter Membership Acceptance form below to share AFTEA with a friend.

Gratefully Yours,


Albert G. Ybanez, CSM, USA (Ret)
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P.S. As part of our thanks for becoming a Charter Member of AFTEA, we'll send your friend the handsome member's coin just like the one you received.

The AFTEA Alliance

is published bi-monthly by the
Armed Forces Top Enlisted Association

Publisher

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