



Statement of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
before the
Senate Committee on Armed Services

January 28, 2014

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Inhofe and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

On behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), I would like to extend our gratitude for being given the opportunity to share with you our views and regarding this important issue that affects the lives of thousands of service members and veterans.

IAVA is the nation's first and largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization for veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and their supporters. Founded in 2004, our mission is critically important but simple – to improve the lives of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and their families. With a steadily growing base of nearly 270,000 members and supporters, we strive to help create a society that honors and supports veterans of all generations.

Last month, Congress overwhelmingly passed the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013, a critical step and much-needed effort to move beyond the unpredictability and lack of fiscal clarity that has been the norm on Capitol Hill for the past few years. The Act was widely praised by lawmakers and pundits alike, and was deemed a dramatic improvement over the status quo^[1]. The architects of the agreement champion that this bill will save “\$20 billion over the next ten years and bring much-needed relief to our already strained defense budget^[2].” IAVA is well aware of the fiscal issues that this nation faces and is supportive of responsible efforts to provide relief from sequestration, but cannot stand behind efforts that try to balance the budget on the backs of those who have sacrificed the most for more than two decades.

As much praise as the deal received following its passage in the House and Senate, the truth of the matter is the budget deal was a backroom agreement that was presented to



Congress right before the holiday recess, bypassing the committees of jurisdiction and was never subjected to the rigorous scrutiny and debate that such an important bill warrants. Once again, Congress had to pass a bill for the American public, specifically service members and veterans, to find out what was in it. Even Department of Defense (DoD) leadership remarked in 2011 that they were “adamantly opposed to changing retirement benefits for those that are currently on active duty” and that “we cannot break faith with those that have served and deployed time and time again and were promised the benefits of this retirement program^[3].” Even President Obama has declared that “We also owe our veterans the care they were promised and the benefits that they have earned. We have a sacred trust with those who wear the uniform of the United States of America. It’s a commitment that begins at enlistment, and it must never end^[4].” With one quick glance at the pension cuts, military retirees and their families are left to wonder when DoD leadership and President Obama will speak out against these cuts and work to quickly overturn them.

In this particular instance, the budget agreement reduced the annual cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for military retirees and survivors by one percent until they reach the age of 62. For some retirees this could lead to a 20 percent cut to retirement benefits over the course of their lives. The budget agreement was yet another example of political abuse of career service members and veteran retirees. It attempts to balance the budget on the backs of those who have already sacrificed the most, and it sends a message to those currently serving and who have served that the promises made to them and their families when they volunteered to serve are retroactively renegotiable. In 2012 Congress established the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission to examine the entire military-compensation system. At the time the Commission was established it was promised that none of the changes would affect currently serving members and retirees. It would be a proposal only for future military members. The new budget deal essentially hamstring and circumnavigates the Commission before it finishes its work and makes its recommendations.



Those that have attempted to justify COLA reductions continually highlight so-called exploding personnel growth^[5] which has spurred some lawmakers to propose significant changes to the military benefits, compensation, and retirement system in the name of fiscal responsibility. These initiatives continue to demonstrate the lack of understanding Congress has when making personnel changes within the military. The COLA provision that brings us together today was made without fully understanding the unintended consequences, as well as its adverse impact on retention and morale.

Defenders of the COLA provision have argued that military pensions are “wildly out of line with most Americans' experience^[6].” Sentiments such as this strike at the crux of the issue: military service is unique and difficult. The hard truth is that spending more than twenty years in uniform has required service members to endure multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, spend countless days away from loved ones, and move to a new installation every few years with the full knowledge that your family can never quite settle in. All of these issues undoubtedly place a massive burden on our military families. This is a reality that simply does not exist in the civilian sector and yet, Congress failed to take this into account when drafting and passing the budget agreement last month. Equating twenty-plus years of military service to twenty-plus years in the civilian workforce is woefully off-target and serves to belittle a career in uniform.

Congress broke its promise to veterans by agreeing to cuts to military retirees and is crossing a line in the sand by failing to fully protect veterans benefits. IAVA is hearing from veterans nationwide that continue to ask Congress listen to them and repeal cuts to all military retirees as quickly as possible. Although the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 restored full pension benefits for working-age disabled military retirees and survivors of deceased service members, IAVA continues to call for a full repeal of the cuts to all military retirees. We simply ask Congress to stand behind the benefits promised and stand up for those who have served. We again appreciate the opportunity to offer our views on this important topic, and we look forward to continuing to work with each of you, your staff, and this Committee to improve the lives of veterans and their families. Thank you for your time and attention.



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^[1] <http://www.murray.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/newsreleases?ID=d26a049f-8049-45a7-9519-4d6b597dc96c>

^[2] <http://paulryan.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=365156#.Uua5ANlo5dg>

^[3] http://armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/hearings-display?ContentRecord_id=D2EB48AD-AC15-4E3A-A7B7-C5EC2FA0EB73&ContentType_id=14F995B9-DFA5-407A-9D35-56CC7152A7ED&Group_id=41030bc2-0d05-4138-841f-90b0fbaa0f88&MonthDisplay=10&YearDisplay=2011

^[4] http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/veterans_and_wounded_warriors_record_0.pdf

^[5] <http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2013/12/22/veterans-retirement-paul-ryan-budget-deal-column/4164713/>

^[6] <http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2014/01/01/military-pensions-paul-ryan-budget-deal-cola-editorials-debates/4280837/>