

NATIONAL ECONOMIC COMMISSION

TOPIC 1: Mark Walker attended a hearing before the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs concerning VA and DoD cooperation and the reintegration of National Guard and Reserves

BACKGROUND: In this current era of a significantly smaller all-volunteer military, the reliance on the National Guard and Reserve to fight the present Global War on Terror is unprecedented. The Reserve forces have become an essential part of all current DoD operations. Reservists in Iraq and Afghanistan reflect a significant portion of the total deployed force in any given month, and DoD reports that continued reliance on the 1.8 million Reserve and National Guard troops will continue well into the foreseeable future. National Guard and Reserve troops are returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan only to encounter difficulties with their Federal and civilian employers at home. Many of these returning service members have lost jobs, promotions, benefits and, in a few cases, they even encountered job demotions.

POSITION: The American Legion supports the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP). Service members would greatly benefit by having access to the resources and knowledge that TAP/DTAP can provide. The American Legion also encourages DoD to require that all separating, active-duty service members, including those from the Reserves and the National Guard, be given an opportunity to participate in TAP/DTAP training not more than 180 days prior to their separation or retirement from the armed forces, and follow-up counseling not later than 180 days after separation from active duty. The American Legion supports efforts to mandate that all service members be given the opportunity to participate in TAP/DTAP.

ACTION: The American Legion will continue to monitor this important issue.

TOPIC 2: Employment

BACKGROUND: The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has partnered with Monster Government Solutions, a division of Monster Worldwide, Inc. a company that markets online employment services to employers and job seekers. Monster, in partnership with VA's Center for Veterans Enterprise, provides veteran-owned small businesses the opportunity to post job openings for veterans, including service-disabled veterans, at a large price discount. Monster will post the job openings for 60 days, twice as long for other employers. Dr. James B. Peake, Secretary of Veterans Affairs, said, "This government-corporate partnership represents the best kind of effort to help those who gave up time in their lives to serve their country and return to an economic community that may not recognize their skills. The program should make it easier for employers to find qualified job candidates as well as veteran suppliers and service contractors." The partnership goal is to help veteran owners get business from other companies and

prospective veteran employees find jobs. The VA-Monster agreement is initially for 2 years and provides for extensions.

POSITION: The American Legion supports Federal agencies, companies, and organizations that assist Veteran-owned businesses along with those veterans who are seeking suitable and stable employment.

ACTION: The American Legion will continue to monitor the VA-Monster partnership.

TOPIC 3: Education bills

BACKGROUND: Families of service members killed in Iraq and Afghanistan will no longer be slapped with a bill if the member owed money to the Veterans Affairs Department of Education benefits he/she never got a chance to use. A provision of the war supplemental funding measure, not only stops the practice, but also authorizes refunds to any families who, since September 11, 2001, have paid a bill sent by the VA to recoup its overpayment of benefits to a deceased service member. Most of the overpayments the VA was trying to collect were related to GI Bill educational benefits for National Guard and Reserve members who were mobilized while receiving benefits. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-TX, the chief sponsor of the debt-waiver provision, said, “who would have thought that someone who dies serving our country in Iraq and leaves behind a \$300 bill due to the VA for education benefits-that they were not able to finish because they gave their life in the war-would then get a bill?” The new law will ensure that every family who paid a bill would be reimbursed, and no bill will ever go out again.

POSITION: The American Legion supports the debt-waiver provision that stopped the billing of educational benefits to service members who died while bravely serving the United States of America.

ACTION: The American Legion will monitor the VA to ensure these reimbursements will occur in a timely and proper fashion.

TOPIC 4: Homeless veterans

BACKGROUND: It is estimated that 154,000 veterans are homeless on a typical night and that twice as many veterans experience homelessness during a year. A total of 1,819 Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) veterans have been seen in VA homeless outreach during the past three fiscal years and 556 have sought and been treated in residential services at VA-operated or community-based VA Grant and Per Diem Program. The number of homeless veterans reporting OIF/OEF service is increasing; but constitutes 2.4 percentage of the overall homeless population. Earlier this year, the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) published a report that estimated approximately 46,000 veterans meet the criteria to be considered as “chronically homeless.” Within the last couple of years, there has been a reduction in the

number of homeless veterans on the streets of America. The partnership of Federal agencies and community organizations along with the leadership and oversight of Congress has succeeded in building an intervention network that is becoming more effective and efficient.

POSITION: The American Legion will continue to seek and support any legislative or administrative proposal that will provide medical, rehabilitative and employment assistance to homeless veterans and their families.

ACTION: The American Legion will continue to monitor homeless veteran issues and the effectiveness of Federal agencies and community organizations that assist homeless veterans.

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Week Ending 7/25/08

Legislative Division Update

TOPIC 1: Medicare Reimbursement for VA medical care

BACKGROUND: VA is prohibited from billing Medicare for third-party reimbursements for the treatment of enrolled, Medicare-eligible veterans' nonservice-connected medical conditions. The American Legion recommends Medicare reimbursements to supplement VA annual budget. **ACTION:** The American Legion continues to lobby lawmakers to authorize VA to collect third-party reimbursements from the Centers of Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). **POSITION:** The American Legion fully supports Medicare reimbursement for VA and will seek legislation in the 110th Congress.

TOPIC 2: Mandatory Funding for VA medical care

BACKGROUND: The American Legion, VFW, DAV, AMVETS, Blinded Veterans Association, JWV, Military Order of the Purple Heart, PVA, and VVA have joined forces in support of change VA medical care from *discretionary* to *mandatory* annual appropriations. The goal is to help stabilize VA medical care funding by using a formula based system similar to Social Security and Medicare. The Partnership is placing emphasis on sufficiency, timeliness, and predictability of VA's annual appropriations. Rep. Hare (IL) reintroduced legislation offered by his predecessor, Lane Evans, H.R. 2514, *Assured Funding For Veterans Health Care Act*, which now has **125** cosponsors. Senator Johnson has introduced a companion bill, S. 2639 which has **7** cosponsors. The "Partnership" supports these measures. **ACTION:** On July 25, 2007 the Partnership for Veterans Health Care Budget Reform presented testimony to the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee supporting mandatory funding for VA health care programs. As a member of the Partnership, The American Legion fully supports its statement. On October 3, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee held a similar hearing. When asked by lawmakers, VA witnesses expressed opposition to mandatory funding for VA medical care. **POSITION:** The American Legion will continue to seek legislation for assured funding in the 110th Congress and monitor these bills as they works its way through Congress.

TOPIC 3: Disabled Veterans' Tax in the 110th Congress

BACKGROUND: President Bush signed the first FY 2008 National Defense Authorization Act on January 28, Public Law 110-181. Under this bill, Chapter 61 military retirees with less than 20 years of military service can now qualify for concurrent receipt of their military retirement pay and their VA disability compensation without the dollar for dollar offset for Combat Related Special Compensation. In addition, military retirees rated 100 percent service-connected disabled due to Individual Unemployability will receive full concurrent receipt without the phase-in agreed to last year beginning in October 2008. **ACTION:** The American Legion will continue to urge expanding benefits for *all* service-connected disabled military retirees in the 110th Congress. **POSITION:** The American Legion supports the full repeal of the Disabled Veterans' Tax in the 110th Congress.

TOPIC 4: VA Budget for FY 2009

BACKGROUND: In September 2007, National Commander Conatser testified before a joint session of the Veterans’ Affairs Committees. He outlined The American Legion’s funding recommendations for FY 09 for specific discretionary accounts within the Department of Veterans Affairs. The President’s budget request for FY 09 was released on Monday, Feb. 4, 2008. The House Committee on Appropriations passed and sent to the full House its *Fiscal Year 2009 Military Construction, Veterans Affairs’ and Related Agencies* appropriations bill on June 24, 2008. **ACTION:** The American Legion testified before the House and Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committees, on February 7th and 13th respectively, in response. The testimony is available on the Internet: <http://veterans.house.gov/hearings/Testimony.aspx?TID=13345>.

Discretionary Funding Programs	Final FY 2008 P.L. 110-161	President’s Proposal FY 2009	<i>Legion’s FY 09 Request</i>
Total Medical Care	\$36.7 billion	\$38.7 billion	\$38.4 billion
Medical Services	\$29.1 billion	\$34 billion	
Medical Administration	\$3.2 billion		
Medical Facilities	\$4.1 billion		
Medical/Prosthetics Research	\$480 million	\$442 million	\$476 million
Major Construction	\$1.1 billion	\$582 million	\$1.56 billion
Minor Construction	\$579 million	\$329 million	\$485 million
State Veterans’ Homes Construction Grants Program	\$165 million	\$85 million	\$275 million
State Veterans’ Cemetery Construction Grants Program	\$39 million	\$32 million	\$45 million
National Cemetery Administration	\$195 million	\$181 million	\$228 million
General Operating Expenses	\$1.6 billion	\$1.7 billion	\$2.8 billion
Information Technology	\$2 billion	\$2.4 billion	\$2.3 billion

* The American Legion opposes MCCF being offset against VA medical care discretionary funding and recommends it be “scored” as a supplement to the annual appropriations.

On July 17, the Senate Appropriations Committee approved the fiscal 2009 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs spending bill. The panel approved the \$119.7 billion measure 29-0. The Senate’s spending measure would provide \$1 billion more than the draft measure approved June 24 by the House Appropriations Committee and a total of \$28.5 billion more than President Bush requested in his budget. The Senate legislation would provide \$72.7 billion in discretionary spending for military construction and VA operations, roughly \$3.7 billion more than the amount requested by the White House and in line with the total approved by the House panel. Roughly \$48 billion in discretionary spending would be allocated for the VA, with about \$24.7 billion provided for military

construction, family housing and base realignment and closure. Under the House legislation, approximately \$47.7 billion in discretionary spending and \$46 billion in mandatory funding would be allocated for the VA, while \$24.8 billion in discretionary funding and no mandatory spending would be provided for military construction, family housing and base realignment and closure. Under the Senate version, approximately 85 percent of the VA's discretionary funding, or \$41.1 billion, would go to funding veterans' health care services, including facility maintenance and research. The measure approved by the Senate committee includes: \$526.8 million to increase the budget for medical and prosthetic research, approximately \$84 million more than President Bush proposed; \$1.2 billion for major VA construction projects, roughly \$636 million more than the White House requested; \$1.1 billion for VA facility upkeep and repair projects, about \$300 million more than the president sought; \$350 million to increase the current income threshold for the least needy veterans (Priority Group 8). Currently, a veteran with an annual salary as low as \$28,430 would not be eligible for treatment at a VA facility; and \$250 million to start up a new health care outreach program for veterans living in rural parts of the country. **POSITION:** The American Legion fully supports the funding totals as approved by the House Appropriations Committee for VA discretionary programs for FY 2009.

TOPIC 5: Flag Amendment

BACKGROUND: The American Legion remains committed to protecting Old Glory from acts of physical desecration and overturning *Texas v. Johnson* (1989). **ACTION:** Rep. Murtha (PA) has introduced H.J. Res. 12, "*The Congress shall have power to prohibit the physical desecration of the flag of the United States.*" H.J. Res. 12 currently has **70** cosponsors. On June 12 Senator Vitter (LA) introduced S.J. Res. 40 which has been referred to the Committee on the Judiciary. It does not yet have any cosponsors. **POSITION:** The American Legion fully supports a proposed constitutional amendment to prohibit the physical desecration of Old Glory.

TOPIC 6: Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act

BACKGROUND: College costs have increased substantially over the last 20 years. Recently separated veterans are seeking higher education, using their Montgomery GI Bill benefits, with an emphasis on reentering the civilian workforce. Benefits should remain commensurate with the sacrifice and service of veterans who need educational assistance. **ACTION:** Rep. Harry Mitchell (AZ) introduced H.R. 5740, the *Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act*. H.R. 5740 modernized veterans' educational benefits by aligning them with the highest in-state cost of tuition per state. It provided a stipend for housing, books, supplies and other educational expenses. Educational benefits would increase each year to match the rising costs of college. The bill accounted for frequent mobilizations of the National Guard and Reserves by implementing a mechanism that allows benefits to be earned on a cumulative basis. Veterans who have earned education benefits may use them during and after active service. The Senate companion bill was S. 22. The Legislative Division was present at a press conference May 13 to support this measure. On June 19 the House passed H.R. 2642, the *Emergency Supplemental Appropriations* bill and sent it to the Senate. This bill provided funding for

the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Senate amended that bill by including in S. 22. A similar measure, S. 2938, was introduced by Senators Graham and Burr; this bill included a provision for transferability of educational benefits to a veteran's immediate family. This provision for transferability was added as an amendment to H.R. 2642 when the House had to agree to the Senate amendment. Congress then passed H.R. 2642, which was signed by the President on June 30. It is now Public Law 110-252. This new benefit begins August 1, 2009. **POSITION:** The American Legion fully supported this updated GI Bill because it meets the needs of veterans who have served in the Global War on Terrorism.

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For Week Ending: 7-25-08**

NATIONAL SECURITY/FOREIGN RELATIONS

DIRECTORS NOTES: This Director experienced his first American Legion State Convention by traveling to Ocean City and participated with the great state of Maryland Legionnaires. It was terrific to meet so many members and discuss National Security and Foreign Relations with so many veterans. It was a great learning and personal experience. **Continuing Budget Work in Congress:** Back here in DC last week the Democratic leadership in both the House and Senate pledged to pass the National Defense Appropriations Act by September 30. Even though no appropriations bills have yet been passed for this year, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) said: "I know the Defense bill, appropriations bill, will be passed. That is our responsibility, and we will do that." This would be very good news if it happens. Most talk heard predicts a Continuing Resolution (CR) as the likely outcome with most folks doubting that anything would be passed before the November election. So, many questions remain unanswered: will this be a standalone bill or will other programs be likely included? Will specific defense items be made a part of a CR to keep the rest of the federal government operating after the new fiscal year starts on October 1? Unfortunately, it seems clear that whatever the bill will be it won't be ready before the August recess.

New TRICARE Retiree Delta Program (TRDP) Goes Into Effect October 1, 2008- Delta Dental has once again been awarded the TRICARE Retiree Dental Program's contract. There is some good news in the new dental program. The program has grown to over 1,000,000 covered lives and is still growing by about 4,000 enrollees per month. The new contract has several improvements. The enhanced program now covers implants and related services at 50% of the allowable payment (to a maximum of \$1500), up to two surface composite resin restorations and an increase in the orthodontic lifetime maximum from the present \$1200 to \$1500. Living overseas, beneficiaries may enroll in the Enhanced Overseas TRDP and be able to receive care worldwide. Living here in the U.S.A., Puerto Rico, U.S. territories or Canada, the TRDP will beneficiaries for emergency care when traveling to other countries!!! Premiums may bring better news too but they have not been quoted yet.

SECDEF Recommends New Guard Chief: Defense Secretary Robert Gates has recommended to the president that Air Force Lt. Gen. Craig R. McKinley be nominated as the next Chief of the National Guard Bureau (NGB). McKinley is presently serving as the Director of the Air National Guard. With his pending nomination and Senate confirmation comes along with a promotion, as the FY2008 National Defense Authorization Act elevated the NGB chief to a four-star billet. Gates also announced that he is recommending the current NGB chief, Army Lt. Gen. H. Steven Blum, take over as the first guardsman to be the deputy commander of U.S. Northern Command, which oversees security in North America. **Army Gift Program Web site Launch:** The new "Gifts to Army" Web site, launched today, is a new online resource developed to streamline and process gifts to the Army that benefit Soldiers and families. Contributing to worthy causes is a tradition in the United States. With the on-going conflict, the public wants to know how it can help with money, goods or services to help relieve many of the stresses and strains that Soldiers now deal with on a daily basis. This Web site will

provide the public an online resource to answer the question: “*How can I help?*” For additional information you can visit the [“Gifts to Army” Web site:](http://giftstoarmy.army.mil/)
<http://giftstoarmy.army.mil/>

NATIONAL SECURITY

TOPIC 1: Al-Qaida “Severely Disrupted” in Iraq’s Babil Province

BACKGROUND: Al-Qaida terrorists have been largely marginalized in Iraq’s Babil province, thanks to the joint efforts of Iraqi and U.S. security forces, as well as local “Sons of Iraq” citizen security groups, a senior U.S. military officer posted in Iraq said today. “The organization related to al-Qaida is severely disrupted, ... as well as the [extremist] militia” in Babil province,” Army Col. Tom James, commander of the 3rd Infantry Division’s 4th Brigade Combat Team, said during a satellite-carried news conference with Pentagon reporters. “Overall, we are extremely optimistic about the security situation in Babil province, because of the professional actions of the Iraqi security forces and the population’s strong desire for peace and stability,” James said. About 1.2 million people live in Babil province, located about 50 kilometers south of Baghdad, James said. Babil’s population is about 70 percent Shia Muslim and 30 percent Sunni Muslim. Hillah is the provincial capital. The improved security, he said, “will stimulate positive governance and economic growth for the future, and eventually will result in irreversible, sustainable security.” James complimented his soldiers’ ability “to adapt rapidly to extremely complex situations,” and he also saluted Iraqi soldiers’ ability to adjust to conditions. The last of the U.S.-provided surge forces recently departed Iraq, but improved Iraqi security forces are picking up the slack, James said. With the departure of the surge troops, “Iraqi security forces are at a [capability] level to be able to handle that,” he added.

The improved security is driving reconstruction and economic progress, James said, noting that 186 Iraqi-government-sponsored economic programs are under way in the province.

POSITION: The American Legion fully supports the President of the United States, the United States Congress and the men, women and leadership of our armed forces as they are engaged in the global war on terrorism; and urges all Americans and freedom-loving peoples everywhere to stand united in their support of the global war on terrorism, and united in their support of the troops who are engaged in protecting our values and way of life. **ACTION:** The American Legion will continue to support all efforts to defeat our enemies in Iraq and in the broader War on Terror.

TOPIC 2: Fatal MRAP Rollovers Prompt Warnings

BACKGROUND: The towering trucks that give U.S. troops the best protection against roadside bombs and enemy bullets also make them vulnerable to routine hazards like sharp turns, rutted roads and rickety bridges.

Five deaths caused by rollovers and dozens of other accidents in Iraq and Afghanistan have led U.S. military leaders to warn troops to be smart behind the wheel, according to military documents obtained by The Associated Press and accident reports released under the Freedom of Information Act.

The message is especially relevant in Afghanistan, where a resurgent Taliban has boosted demand for these steel cocoons, known as MRAPs, short for Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected vehicles. Due to Afghanistan's mountainous terrain and unpaved roads, officials will send nearly 800 more RG-31s, the smallest of several different MRAPs the military now uses.

Yet even at a comparatively nimble nine tons, the RG-31 is not immune from tipping. On June 29, three Green Berets drowned when theirs rolled into a canal in southern Afghanistan. The accident is under investigation.

MRAPs get high marks from commanders for protecting U.S. personnel from enemy attack. Close to 7,000 of the vehicles are already in use in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Pentagon will buy at least that many more.

And despite their bulk, the MRAPs have power steering, air brakes and quick acceleration. These features can lull drivers into thinking they're just handling a bigger version of the smaller and more agile Humvee. **POSITION:** The American Legion fully supports the President of the United States, the United States Congress and the men, women and leadership of our armed forces and united in their support of the troops who are engaged in protecting our values and way of life. **ACTION:** The American Legion will continue to ensure that the military receives necessary support regarding all facets of the mission.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

TOPIC 1: U.S., Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia Put Pressure on Iran

BACKGROUND: The United States and five other world powers have shown they are serious that Iranian leaders must decide whether to halt Iran's uranium enrichment program, which could be used in manufacturing nuclear weapons, says Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

"And I think it's also very clear that there are going to be consequences if they don't," Rice says. According to Rice, the current strategy is to get the Iranian regime to stop uranium enrichment and to accept a package of incentives. If the regime does not stop, she says, there is enough agreement among the six countries to bring additional sanctions through the U.N. Security Council.

POSITION: The American Legion supports productive international relationships. This support includes advocating for necessary international relations, treaties and alliances, in order to protect the citizens of this country, and its democratic way of life. Also, The American Legion fully supports the President of the United States, the United States Congress and the men, women and leadership of our armed forces as they are engaged in the global war on terrorism; and urges all Americans and freedom-loving peoples everywhere to stand *united* in their support of the global war on terrorism, and *united* in

their support of the troops who are engaged in protecting our values and way of life. **ACTION:** The American Legion will continue to support all efforts to defeat our enemies in the War on Terror and will continue to monitor situations to ensure that the military receives necessary support regarding all facets of the mission.

TOPIC 2: North Korea Must Continue to Answer Nuclear Questions, Says Secretary Rice

BACKGROUND: Against a backdrop of growing regional political and economic cooperation, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will discuss the challenges of Burma and North Korea as she meets with leaders from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) July 23-24 in Singapore.

The high-level meeting comes in the wake of three steps forward in the effort to stabilize the Korean Peninsula: North Korea's long-delayed declaration of its past nuclear activities, the demolition of the main cooling tower at its Yongbyon nuclear facility, and North Korea's agreement to allow on-site inspections by Six-Party representatives to verify its declaration and the disabling of its plutonium-producing facilities by the end of October.

Rice played down the meeting in a July 21 press appearance en route to Singapore, but acknowledged that it would send "a very strong message" about the importance of fully verifying North Korea's nuclear claims -- as well as getting answers about other elements of North Korea's nuclear weapons research, such as an alleged covert uranium-enrichment program.

"I wouldn't call it either historic or monumental," Rice said, later adding, "on the other hand ... we want to look forward."

If the declaration can be fully verified, Six-Party Talks envoys will move the process toward its third and final stage: full dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear infrastructure. **POSITION:** The American Legion supports the United States Government to continue its efforts in compelling North Korea to keep its pledge to freeze and dismantle its existing nuclear facilities." **ACTION:** We will continue to monitor this project and share concerns and assessments along with maintaining the viability of related resolutions reaching expiration.

TOPIC 3: Message from Secretary of State in Favor of Columbia Free-Trade Agreement

In a news release published earlier this week Secretary of State Condoleezza said, "In any partnership, the coin of the realm is trust and responsibility -- in other words, saying what you mean and doing what you say. In the dramatic rescue on July 2 of 15 hostages, including three Americans, held captive for many years by guerrillas and terrorists, deep in the Colombian jungles, we saw a powerful reminder that the United States has no better partner in South America than the government and people of Colombia.

Colombia's leaders, especially President Uribe, had promised us that our three abducted citizens would be treated no differently than the many Colombian men and women who shared their fate. Colombia never wavered in this promise, and never cut any side deals with the guerrillas that could have freed their citizens at the expense of ours. This was not an easy act of solidarity, but Colombia remained true to its word.

In the breathtaking rescue mission, carried out with the utmost skill and professionalism (and without a shot being fired) by the Colombian Armed Forces, our partners did great honor to themselves – and a great service to us. We will never forget that. Nor will we forget the many Colombians who still have not found rescue from their guerrilla captors.

That our Colombian partners made good on their promise in this instance is important enough, but this is not the exception; it is the norm.

More than a decade ago, with its country wracked by the worst insurgency in the hemisphere, with its economy contracting, and with its democratic state on the brink of failure, Colombia resolved to turn the tide. Its government and people set out an ambitious plan to secure and expand their country's democratic development, and they asked for our support – political, economic, diplomatic, and military. Starting under President Clinton, expanding under President Bush, and with bipartisan support in Congress all along the way, the United States has fully backed Colombia in meeting its bold promises of success. And the results speak for themselves.

Our Colombian partners said that they would win their fight against domestic terrorism and reclaim their country. Today they are.

They said they would combat social exclusion in Colombia by building the capacity and expanding the reach of their democracy. Today they are.

They said they would open their markets, trade freely and fairly, fuel economic growth, and create opportunities for social justice for all of their citizens. Today they are.

And our Colombian partners said they would protect the lives of all of their citizens, including trade unionists, and bring murderers and criminals to justice. Today violent crime has plummeted, law and order is expanding, and President Uribe's government has taken the courageous step of extraditing 15 major drug traffickers and paramilitary leaders to the United States to stand trial in our courts for their crimes against our citizens.

Colombia has done all of this – and more. And the United States has supported them every step of the way. With the momentum of more than a decade's worth of shared progress at our backs, with Colombia on the cusp of self-sustained and lasting stability, and with Democrats and Republicans having shown that they can implement a long-term bipartisan strategy to achieve a critical national interest – the success of a democratic Colombia – now is the last time that we should begin going back on our word to Colombia. And yet that is exactly what we risk doing if Congress fails to pass the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement.

In addition to being a slap in the face to our Colombian partners, sacrificing this trade agreement at the altar of domestic politics would be no favor to U.S. workers. More than 90 percent of Colombian goods now enter the United States duty-free, while our exports to Colombia face tariffs of up to 35 percent. This agreement would level the playing field for our workers, so they could send the products of their labor to Colombia on the same terms that Colombians now send theirs to us.

Passing this trade agreement will be a culmination and realization of our partnership with Colombia. It will help the Colombian government and people to lock in their democratic and economic reforms. It will signal that Colombia, like a growing number of our fellow democracies in the Americas today, is a reliable place to invest and poised to compete effectively in the global economy. It will affirm that the future of our hemisphere belongs

to democratic citizens, of the left and the right, who want their elected leaders to govern justly and lawfully, to expand economic freedom and trade, and to invest in their people. And it will send a message across the world that the United States will honor the promises we make to our friends and allies.

Colombia has stood by us. We have stood by them. And we have succeeded together. Now is not the time to jeopardize the fruits of our partnership, but to consolidate them. Now is the time to keep our word to Colombia, just as they have kept their word to us. Anything less is no way for a great nation to conduct itself – and no way to repay a faithful partner.”

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NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION

TOPIC 1-VA Mental Illness/Suicide Prevention Outreach

BACKGROUND: The VA is launching a pilot outreach program to encourage veterans to use the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Lisette Mondello, VA assistant secretary for public and intergovernmental affairs, said the program's aim is to see if it helps raise awareness for veterans. The pilot program will take place over a three-month period and will first launch in the Washington, DC, metro area. On July 16, Sec. Peake lifted the prohibition on paid advertising, which led to the creation of this program.

POSITION: The American Legion is hopeful that all veterans with mental health care needs receive the care they need through the VA health care system. Proper care and treatment for veterans suffering from PTSD, suicidal tendencies, and other issues are a major concern of The American Legion.

ACTION: The American Legion will continue to monitor, testify, and maintain outreach regarding this issue.

TOPIC 2: Army Health Care

BACKGROUND: Four generals were contrite during a Tuesday appearance before a House Armed Services subcommittee to explain why, 16 months and at least eight fact-finding investigations after the Walter Reed scandal, the Army still hadn't fixed the health-care system for soldiers wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan. Before the hearing, committee investigators had visited Army medical facilities and came back with ominous statistics that revealed the Army had miscalculated the growth in the number of soldiers needing care, causing it to fall below the required level of staffing at most facilities. The generals testifying before the committee, who admitted that improvements need to be made in this area, professed their devotion to the cause. "Warrior care is our highest priority, second only to the global war on terror," said Lt. Gen. Robert Wilson, commanding general of the US Army Installation Management Command.

POSITION: The American Legion is hopeful that all veterans with mental health care needs receive the care they need through the military as well as the VA. Proper care and treatment for veterans suffering from PTSD, suicidal tendencies, and other issues are a major concern of The American Legion.

ACTION: The American Legion will continue to monitor this issue and will follow up, with testimony and advocacy, as necessary.

TOPIC 3: VA Health Care

BACKGROUND: The VA is scrambling to address the prospect that a mass demobilization of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan will badly overstretch the VA's already-frayed mental health screening program. The VA isn't exactly out in front of the problem, critics say. Rep. Bob Filner,

who chairs the House Veterans Affairs Committee, is pressing the VA to drastically ramp up its mental health operations, in part by starting to draft legislation that would require all war-zone soldiers to undergo psychiatric evaluation as soon as their regiments return stateside. But VA Secretary James B. Peake, whom Filner approached in the initial phases of developing the proposal, remains skeptical. I am just not sure the soldiers will like that, Peake said. I don't want to say anything to have them keep away from their homes. CQ adds that the House's fiscal 2009 military construction and veterans' affairs spending bill would increase the authority of the House Military Construction-VA Appropriations Subcommittee to oversee care given to veterans who develop mental illnesses

POSITION: The American Legion supports the continued overhaul of the VA Health Care system to meet the needs of Veterans and their families in the 21st Century.

ACTION: The American Legion will continue to work with VA and the Congress to ensure the needs of all Veterans and their families are met.

TOPIC 4: American Legion Op-Ed

BACKGROUND: Peter S. Gaytan, American Legion Director of the VA and R Division and the author of *For Service to Your Country: The Insider's Guide to Veterans' Benefits*, notes the VA has announced that it is cutting beds at the VA Medical Center in Denver and the VA Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System in Biloxi. Gaytan urged readers to contact their senators and representatives and let them know that we have an obligation to ensure that our newest generation of combat veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan has access to therapy and treatment. Gaytan added that support for the Full Faith in Veterans Act of 2008, which would improve the disability compensation evaluation for veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and improve the diagnosis and treatment of PTSD, is necessary.

POSITION: The American Legion supports the continued efforts to ensure quality health care services for all Veterans returning from combat and the Full Faith in Veterans Act of 2008.

ACTION: The American Legion will continue to work with VA and the Congress to ensure the needs of all Veterans and their families are met.

NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION

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Week Ending 7/25/08