

Chief's Commentary: Aid for Allies Must Include Support for American Defenders

The following is a message from VFW National Commander Duane Sarmiento

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WASHINGTON — On April 23, the Senate passed \$95 billion in funding to support our allies in Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, an aid package the House worked overtime to pass three days earlier. Many who advocated for this support, to include the VFW, breathed a sigh of relief, as the United States reaffirmed its commitment as a world leader against tyranny.

Three weeks ago, I visited our allies in Taiwan and heard firsthand from both Taiwanese officials and VFW members about the importance of this support.

But before we pat ourselves on the back and declare victory, VFW members once again noticed the conspicuous lack of similar urgency on supporting Americans who stand in harm's way defending the ideals about which Congress says they so urgently care.

Time and again, we see Congress can mobilize in the eleventh hour to support urgent needs — whether it's averting a self-inflicted government shutdown or waiting until the absolute last minute to reaffirm long-standing and noncontroversial commitments to our allies. They even came together on unrelated legislation, sending a sell or be banned ultimatum to the Chinese-owned social media platform TikTok, which they added to the aid package bill based on national security concerns.

We rarely see similar urgency to support veterans. The bean counters in Congress will try to smugly dismiss this correlation, obfuscating on how these are different funds for different purposes. Frankly, Americans don't care about the technical nuance of bureaucratic nonsense. They care about results.

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Support for our allies and support for American warfighters are intrinsically intertwined. If Congress can swiftly approve \$95 billion to support allies and defense contractors, why do these same legislators balk at the cost of paying military retirees their full earned pensions and disability payments?

Commonly called “concurrent receipt,” the VFW has been fighting for more than 20 years for Congress to keep a promise it made in 2003 to end the unjust policy of offsetting these earned benefits.

The VFW has been a thought leader in this space, trying to incrementally fix the problem, focusing first on those who literally bled to defend our country.

The Major Richard Star Act would allow medical retirees who were wounded in combat the option to receive their full military retirement benefits in addition to medical disability. These two distinctly different benefits currently offset one another. Despite veto-proof support across Congress, this common-sense policy solution has stalled for nearly half a decade — regardless of who controls Congress or the White House.

Just last month, I testified before the House and Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committees, calling for the Major Richard Star Act to go to the president’s desk now, ending this injustice. VFW members then hit the halls of Congress mustering even more support for a bill that would send a strong message of solidarity to American service members, past, present and future.

While just about everyone in Congress publicly gives support, they privately balk at the purported price tag of a meager \$1 billion per year. Think about that. We have \$95 billion to throw around whenever we need it, but when veterans ask for a small share to end a glaring injustice, suddenly we can’t scrape together enough nickels to get it done.

This is not about the money, it is about the gesture of support to our all-volunteer force, which is a national security imperative in the context of recent recruiting shortfalls.

Defense officials, legislators and pundits consistently come to the VFW, lamenting about the military’s troubles recruiting young Americans to serve. When they talk to us about it, it’s like listening to the stages of grief: They deny their responsibility. They get angry and blame the VFW. They bargain with us over what more we should be doing.

Even when the VFW pressured Congress to do the right thing on the Honoring Our PACT Act two years ago, we caught flak from so-called defense experts who refused to recognize that providing for the intrinsic hazards of military service actually reinforced trust and confidence in the military.

It’s time for Washington to accept that this failure rests with decision makers and the

fundamental disconnect between Beltway insiders and the Americans who volunteer to serve on the front lines.

When I visited troops in Europe last fall, I heard how our military is consistently “doing more with less” to execute its missions across Europe, Africa and the Middle East. One group told us they felt like America’s “Easy Button” — and this was before Israel was attacked on Oct. 7.

Moreover, the VFW is tracking more than 30 states who are considering legislation explicitly restricting the conditions under which the federal government can activate their overtaxed National Guard. Something is clearly broken, but the echo chamber in Washington chooses not to see it.

Since its inception, the VFW has been a strong and vocal proponent of our military, the merits of military service, and the promotion and protection of American ideals. At times in history, it has been our duty to speak truth to power to consistently improve this majestic American experiment. When we see a problem, we act.

Today we have a major problem. While public sentiment toward the military remains high, young Americans who are fit to serve do not see the military as a viable career path. Initiatives like the PACT Act and the Star Act reinforce trust and confidence in the military, helping bolster the numerous benefits of service many veterans readily acknowledge. It’s time that Washington has the same epiphany that America’s standing in the world is not dictated solely by how lethal our weapons can be, or how much money we can throw at a problem, but how committed Americans are to the preservation of liberty and deterrence of our enemies.

The VFW unquestionably supports our allies in Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan. We know the support Congress pledged is critical. But Congress can never forget that supporting our allies includes supporting our troops. As U.S. military men and women receive injuries supporting and defending our allies, Congress dismisses its obligations to its own servicemembers while giving our allies more money. All the cash, bullets, and bombs are meaningless if we fail to ensure that America’s all-volunteer force stands ready to protect our interests across the globe.

If Congress can get a bill passed that protects American interests abroad and cyberspace at home, then we expect them to show the same urgency to honoring its commitments to Americans who have defended this country by passing the Major Richard Star Act today.