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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

A mix of victories and defeats in new defense act, says The American Legion

WASHINGTON (Oct. 28, 2009) - The leader of The American Legion, the nation's largest veterans service organization, says he feels a mixture of pleasure and disappointment at the contents of the Fiscal Year 2010 Defense Authorization Act. The measure was signed into law today by President Obama and witnessed by Peter S. Gaytan, Executive Director of the Legion's Washington, D.C. headquarters.

"One of the four pillars upon which The American Legion was founded is national security," said the organization's national commander, Clarence E. Hill. "So, among our major concerns are the maintenance of a strong national defense and the provision of a favorable quality of life for military families.

"With regard to national defense -- from The American Legion's point of view -- the new Defense Authorization Act contains some good news in that it authorizes an extra 30-thousand troops for the U.S. Army," continued Hill. "Though the increase is not as much as we would like, it does, in fact, double the number in the administration's original budget request. We thank Congress for that. The new act also contains a 3.4-percent pay raise for active duty, National Guard and Reserve members. This exceeds the President's budget request by half a percent. We thank members of Congress for that, as well. The new act also prevents, at least for the coming year, any increase in TRICARE military health insurance co-payments for inpatient care and mandates a long list of initiatives to protect absentee voting rights for military personnel and their families. These are all good things.

"However, The American Legion is disappointed that several measures for which we lobbied were dropped from the final defense act," Hill said. Most, such as our much favored phasing out of compromised pay for medically retired service members and deduction of survivor benefits from military survivor benefits plan (SBP) annuities, were due to failures to identify funding offsets.

Indicative of this is the omission from the act of a Senate-passed provision expressing the sense of Congress that military retirement and health benefits are the primary reward for the extraordinary demands and sacrifices made by members of our armed forces; that those who serve our country by pursuing a military career deserve health benefits commensurate with their sacrifices and that the Department of Defense needs to explore methods of reducing health care spending other than shifting more costs to military beneficiaries.

"That *should* go without saying," concluded Cmdr. Hill, "but, nevertheless, this defense authorization act should have said it."

About The American Legion

With a current membership of 2.5-million wartime veterans, The American Legion is the nation's largest veterans organization. It was founded in 1919 on the four pillars of a strong national security, veterans affairs, Americanism, and youth programs. Legionnaires work for the betterment of their communities through more than 14,000 posts across the nation.