Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

The hallowed ground of Arlington National Cemetery, a little over 600 acres of northern Virginia hillside, has stood since the Civil War as the crown jewel of reverence for fallen warriors, the men and women who have served this nation in peacetime and war in the air, on land and at sea. Arlington National Cemetery is the epicenter of a country’s reverence for these service members. This is the sacred ground of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldiers, and John F. Kennedy’s Eternal Flame.

Over the last several years, the American public has learned the manner in which past management of these grounds led to a state of disorder, disrepair and disrespect that was clearly disgraceful. There is very little to be served by reciting a litany of the past failures. Rather it is far more important to acknowledge the intervening successes and recognize the remaining challenges.

Last summer, in June of 2010, the transition of management began. Kathryn Condon took up the post of Executive Director of the Army National Cemeteries Program, and other changes would follow. Director Condon and her team have been tireless and honest, sometimes brutally so, in the pursuit of righting this sinking ship. The American Legion applauds Director Condon for her forthright efforts to correct these errors.

In Washington, it is not unheard of to sweep unpleasant truths out of the public eye. Facts which reflect poorly upon an organization or program are recast with new spin. It’s almost unheard of
to admit to shortcomings and failings. Given the preoccupation with self-preservation, the candor from the new management team over the past year has been refreshing. This administration has not shied from hard truths; they have instead met them head on.

The news coming from the cemetery was seldom good, and often horrifying, but it was also honest. America learned of mislabeled remains, and bodies of our nation’s fallen heroes buried in the wrong locations. This was not some trivial matter thought to have occurred once or twice, but perhaps in thousands of locations. Cemetery staff, when questioned by incoming management regarding standard procedure manuals for burials and plot alignment, admitted no such written records existed, and work had been handed down by word of mouth. Electronic records did not exist; information was stored on index cards. As anyone who has spent even an hour in the armed forces will tell you, military operations succeed largely due to rigid adherence to standard operating procedures. Arlington Cemetery had none of these standard operating procedures, only a collection of anecdotal practices likely to vary from one person to the next.

Perhaps the only thing more eye-opening than the litany of prior failings at the cemetery was the willingness of new management to dig deep enough to find all of the errors and begin plans to set them aright.

Over a year later, Arlington Cemetery is far from fixed, but it is on the road to recovery. The American Legion believes it is important to call attention to the hard work and dedication of this staff because it is far outside the norm for business as usual in Washington. In government, all too often when problems surface, they are swept under a rug in the hopes a distracted public will soon forget and move on to the next issue of outrage.

The willingness of Director Condon and her staff to meet these issues openly, with candor and sensitivity, yet still with unflinching honesty, is worthy of high praise. The behavior of these individuals should be an example to the rest of the federal government in how to behave when you let the public down. They do not make excuses. They do not make empty promises. They roll up their sleeves, humbly tell you they are sorry for past actions and are willing to make things right, and then they go about doing just that.

Whether the Army retains the ultimate ongoing responsibility of managing, operating, and maintaining Arlington National Cemetery and the U.S. Soldiers’ and Airmen’s Home National Cemetery remains to be seen. The American Legion has made clear our position that this responsibility would best be placed under the auspices of the National Cemetery Administration and their long track record of operating the nation’s 131 national cemeteries. Under such reorganization, of course the ceremonial duties would be preserved as the domain of the Army through the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, “The Old Guard.” The American Legion believes the responsibilities of “The Old Guard,” which include conducting military ceremonies, manning the 24-hour vigil at the Tomb of the Unknowns, and being the provider of military funeral escorts at Arlington, should never change, as a result of any reorganization associated with Arlington National Cemetery.

Each and every agency of the federal government is charged with a mission. For the Army, that mission is providing for the nation’s defense. For the National Cemetery Administration that
mission is to provide dignified burial for military veterans and their families and to maintain our nation’s military cemeteries as the national shrines we expect them to be. While The American Legion believes the U.S. Army is certainly capable of executing duties outside those most basic to providing for the national defense with honor and success, we do not believe there is reason to call upon them to do so when there is a body such as NCA capable of meeting those needs.

We cannot escape the past of Arlington. The Army asked to be given the chance to erase the dark stain upon their honor and through the efforts of the current administration they have done so. Every day the men and women who work to restore Arlington to its unimpeachable ideal bring honor to the Army, and most importantly to the men and women they serve; the interred remains of our fallen. The American Legion applauds the efforts and results of those who have worked so hard to turn Arlington back to the proper path. While the destination of that path has yet to be determined, it can at least be said those responsible for shepherding this sacred place of honor down that path are doing so with the respect and dedication needed.