The following editorial by the national commander of The American Legion was delivered today to the editors of the Army Times and Air Force Times in response to an article by Robert F. Dorr which will appear in the December 1 editions of both publications. The article follows Nat. Cmdr. Rehbein’s op-ed.

‘Modern’ American Legion continues to thrive

By National Commander David K. Rehbein

As national commander of The American Legion, I was quite surprised by Robert Dorr’s column “VFW, Legion must modernize in order to thrive.” While I whole-heartedly agree with the sentiments of the headline, I find it sad that one of your contributors is so lacking in his knowledge about the nation’s largest veterans organization.

The American Legion has always been on the cutting edge of modernization, whether it be providing meaningful service to today’s military members and their families or informing the public of our issues and programs through our national website, www.legion.org, social networking sites, electronic newsletter or monthly magazine. In fact, I encourage all past and present military members to visit www.mygibill.org, where they will find everything they need to know about the new GI Bill and other educational benefits offered to veterans.

Not only did we originate the first GI Bill, but, according to Chairman of the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Subcommittee, Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, “Passing the new GI Bill into law could not have happened without the dedicated efforts of The American Legion.”

Mr. Dorr says the “ladies auxiliary,” (his term, not ours) is a relic of the past. This is news to the nearly one million women who comprise the American Legion Auxiliary and volunteer in more than 10,100 communities across the country. Moreover, honorably discharged females have been full-fledged Legion members since 1919, one year before they could vote for President of the United States.

As Mr. Dorr points out, the Preamble to the Constitution of The American Legion does call on us to “combat the autocracy of both the classes and the masses” but he fails to explain how this translates into a “Red Scare.” The American Legion is simply dedicating itself to battle extremism – whether it comes from the far left or the far right.

Despite Dorr’s assertions, The American Legion remains relevant by administering community-based programs such as Heroes to Hometowns, The American Legion Legacy Scholarship, Boys State, American Legion Baseball, and the Child Welfare Foundation, just to name a few. The American Legion is tireless in its lobbying efforts before Congress and the Executive Branch on issues pertaining to veterans, our military and their families.

It does not appear from our membership records that Mr. Dorr belongs to The American Legion. This may explain why he objects to prayers being said at most American Legion meetings, since I don’t recall hearing any of our members object to the practice. Given the high-level of concern most veterans have about protecting religious symbols on veterans memorials and in cemeteries, I can’t help but wonder if it is Mr. Dorr who is, perhaps, out of touch on this issue, as well as on the focus, size and relevancy of The American Legion.

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David K. Rehbein of Ames, Iowa, is national commander of the 2.6 million-member American Legion, the nation’s largest wartime veterans organization. A high resolution photo of Cmdr. Rehbein is available at www.legion.org.

VFW, Legion must modernize in order to thrive
As a people, we recognize that the world is constantly changing.
We like to believe we can cope with, and benefit from, change.
The American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and other major organizations that represent veterans’ interests have moved mountains to help America’s veterans. But they seem mired in the distant past, hamstrung by customs, practices and rituals that don’t appeal to younger veterans.
Although the individuals in these organizations are wonderful, these groups display an institutional attitude toward women that is decades out of date. Many have a “ladies’ auxiliary,” even though both words are relics of the past, sometimes viewed by younger veterans as demeaning and obsolete.
The military, like much of America, has banned smoking in most buildings and discourages drinking, but the veterans’ groups haven’t followed suit.
Veterans’ meetings are filled with ritual, and not just the pledge of allegiance and opening prayer.
Legionnaires recite the American Legion Creed, vowing to “combat the autocracy of both the classes and the masses,” an expression that apparently dates to the “Red Scare” of 1919, when Americans feared the country might be taken over by Bolsheviks.
As their populations grow older and their ranks thinner, these organizations are having limited success attracting younger veterans, especially women and minorities.
One veteran told me he didn’t want to “wear that funny hat.” This is sad. These great organizations have been powerful allies for those who served in uniform and had a towering influence on our times. The Legion almost single-handedly persuaded Congress to enact the World War II GI Bill of Rights, which sent millions to school in the postwar era. Recently, veterans’ groups pressured lawmakers to provide better care and benefits for our combat wounded.
Most of the millions who belong to these veterans’ groups are good people. They support worthy causes and perpetuate the bond that links all who served. Many recognize that change is essential if their organizations are to continue doing their good works.
These organizations should drop any component that relates to gender. They must stop using the word “auxiliary,” which suggests a second-rate citizen who is an appendage to someone else.
These organizations must ban smoking indoors in their facilities and discourage drinking, even if it means giving up a source of income.
These organizations need to reconsider the way they hold meetings. Does prayer really belong in a gathering of veterans? Why?
The Legion, the VFW and other veterans’ groups need to fall into step or the rest of us will leave them behind.
ROBERT F. DORR

The writer, an Air Force veteran, lives in Oakton, Va. He is co-author of “Hell Hawks,” a history of an American fighter group in World War II. His e-mail address is robert.f.dorr@cox.net.

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