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Our Government's Number One Responsibility

By National Commander Michael D. Helm

The government rationale for the latest round of defense cuts is sequestration. I prefer to call it abdication. After the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, politicians often accused one another of having a “pre-9/11 mentality.” Yet now, with the Executive Branch controlled by the Democrats and the Legislative Branch controlled by the Republicans, we are cutting our military to pre-World War II levels.

As the national commander of The American Legion, I have been visiting U.S. military bases around the globe. Just last month a three-star general asked me ‘what’s it going to take for people to wake-up, Paris burning?’ And this was before ISIS inspired terrorist attacks in three continents on a single day.

In addition to ISIS and al Qaeda, nations such as Russia, North Korea, Iran and China have all engaged in provocative and threatening acts. In fact, the Washington Times reported that China recently test-fired a new submarine-launched missile with the capability of inflicting nuclear strikes against all 50 states.

Lest you think that China is simply an economic threat, consider that its state run newspaper published in 2013 that a nuclear JL-2 missile strike on the western United States would kill 5 million to 12 million people.

The American Legion is committed to keeping America safe. A strong national defense is one of the pillars upon which our organization was founded. Yet, the 2016 defense budget is projected to be 31 percent less than it was in 2010. The Army plans to cut an additional 40,000 troops. These cuts are irresponsible and they are dangerous.

Unless Congress spares the military from another sequestration round, annual training will again be slashed. While we cannot definitively blame sequestration for the deaths of servicemembers, I cannot help but recall a military investigation that revealed that a 2013 training accident at a Nevada mortar range was caused by human error and inadequate training. It cost 7 U.S. Marines their lives and wounded several others.

Then there are the personnel costs associated with these budget cuts. While a strong argument can be made that a military draft would lighten the burden from the less than one percent of the brave Americans who are already defending our freedom, a strong all-volunteer force would be more cost-effective.

Yet military members are noticing the chipping away of their pay and benefits that has been occurring at an alarming rate over the years. In 2009, a Military Times survey indicated that 91 percent of military members rated their quality of life as “good” or “excellent.” In 2014, only 56 percent felt that way. Moreover, 70 percent now predict that the quality of life for servicemembers will decline.

Defense Secretary Ashton Carter has said that the military must make the services attractive to young people. He has plenty of work to do. In order to make military service a viable option to this tech-savvy generation, he can begin by shelving a recommendation of The Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission which would eventually eliminate the current pension system for those who make a career of the military.

While it has become fashionable to compare private sector 401-k plans to what our military retirees receive, let’s dispel the myth that the pension system is somehow overly generous.

Unlike private sector careerists, those who spend 20 years or more in the military have been required to change duty stations every two or three years, frequently separate from their families, risk life and limb in combat zones, rigorously train in brutal conditions, uproot their children from schools and friends, interrupt careers of their working spouses, and subject themselves to a military justice system that can imprison them for disrespecting their boss. If you compensate military service in the same manner as the private sector, don’t be surprised when the best and brightest choose the private sector.

Just as importantly, we should not allow our national and elected leaders to pit personnel costs and benefits against weapons modernization and training. We can and must do both. We owe it to every man and woman in uniform that we will never send them in harm’s way without the resources to win. Our nation deserves it and our Constitution requires it.

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