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The American Legion draws line in sand over military retirement

By Jimmie L. Foster

For the past year, I have traveled through every state and several foreign countries meeting with veterans, servicemembers and military families. This experience has given me the opportunity to listen and learn from the heroes of yesterday, today and tomorrow. While meeting our young warriors of today, I saw the same dedication, resolve, and honor that was apparent when I served in uniform. It made me happy to be a veteran, national commander of The American Legion and, most importantly, an American.

Yet I realized these young men and women have earned our unwavering support and unconditional dedication in return for their service. These warriors are fighting for us, our country and our ideals. While they are focused on our enemies, a debate has begun over how we can change their retirements, their benefits and their quality of life; these kinds of proposals are unconscionable and The American Legion opposes them outright. The Department of Defense must not support changes to its military retirement system that would prove detrimental to the men and women in our armed forces.

The American Legion is mindful of the difficult economic times faced by Americans, and the importance of fiscal responsibility by our federal government. We understand that we have to make sacrifices together as a nation to get through these especially challenging times.

We must draw a line in the sand when it comes to reducing military retirement benefits earned by our warriors.

Last month, the Defense Business Board issued a plan to "modernize" the military retirement system by introducing a 401(K)-style alternative, based on the current Uniformed Military Personnel Thrift Savings Plan. In most private-sector savings plans, employees contribute portions of their salaries to 401(K) accounts (usually over many years) to build their retirement funds. Some observers argue that military retirement, earned after a minimum of 20 years service, is unfair when compared to such private-sector plans.

Much of the problem inherent in this argument rests upon what Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen has referred to as "a growing chasm developing between civilian and military populations in this country." How does one compare the sacrifices made by career servicemembers to those made by civilians? Why should military retirement benefits be measured with a private-sector yardstick?

For about 99 percent of our population, their "sacrifice" in fighting the global war on

terrorism consists mainly of standing in long lines at the airport, and taking off their shoes and belts whenever they fly. The remaining one percent of Americans – our men and women in uniform – understand the real meaning of sacrifice in this decade-long war.

These are the people who have sacrificed their lives, their bodies, their peace of mind and – in some cases – their hopes and dreams for this nation. These heroes have slept on rocks in godforsaken places, taking the fight to those who have vowed death and destruction to America. These are people who have witnessed upheaval in their families, who have missed seeing their children grow up, and who often return home unable to find a job.

Some plans being discussed would require active-duty servicemembers to put a percentage of their salaries into a retirement fund; this type of "solution" has been rejected in the past. A 1978 Congressional Budget Office (CBO) report, "The Military Retirement System: Options for Change" found serious problems in a contribution-based system.

One major disadvantage was that junior enlisted servicemembers with families did not have the available income to make such contributions. If they were allowed to opt out of such a retirement plan, they would do so for many years and thereby defeat the plan's purpose.

I'm sure that many of us have heard of – or met – junior enlisted servicemembers who qualify for food stamps. If you haven't, you should be aware that they exist out there – even as they sacrifice for our security and freedom. Some military families simply can't get by these days without assistance. So how much worse will they fare if DoD makes contributions to military retirement mandatory?

The CBO report said that, in order to compensate servicemembers for their retirement contributions, base salaries would have to be increased proportionately. This expense, combined with DoD's matching contributions, would actually increase the overall budget.

You can't start tinkering with this retirement system without reevaluating the whole pay structure in the military. It isn't something you can do piecemeal. Military salaries and benefits are an inter-related package and have to be considered that way.

The shorter periods of military service, compared to several decades of private-sector employment, reflect further differences between military and civilian life. Service in uniform is a young person's game. After 20 or 25 years of high-tempo, physically demanding circumstances, it's time to move on to other things. You can't compare it to a lifetime career as a broker or an insurance salesman.

Military service is a high-pressure job that takes a physical and emotional toll – 20-year enlistments that often include four to six combat deployments, post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, and all the aches, pains and worn-out joints that arise from carrying a 70-pound rucksack.

At home, our mistakes at work may be measured by bar graphs or profit margins. Mistakes in combat are measured by body bags.

National defense remains a key concern of The American Legion. We will not lie dormant while 'bean counters' sabotage the compensation package earned by servicemembers through their years of sacrifice and dedication to duty.

I call on The American Legion's 2.4 million members, as well as The American Legion Auxiliary, the Sons of The American Legion – and all Americans – to join me in protecting those who are fighting for us. This is a serious threat to America's security that must not go unchallenged.

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Jimmie L. Foster of Anchorage, Alaska, is national commander of The American Legion, the nation's largest wartime veterans organization with 2.4 million members.

Media contact: Marty Callaghan, 202-263-5758/202-215-8644 or mcallaghan@legion.org