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Needed changes improving VA's service, Gober says

In an upbeat report on the Department of Veterans' Affairs, Deputy Secretary Hershel Gober told the National Veterans' Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission that changing the way the VA does its work is and has been absolutely necessary.

"We're doing some things people generally don't understand," Gober said at the commission's meeting yesterday. "But if it doesn't help serve veterans better, I won't sign off on it...and my boss, Togo West, won't sign off on it, either."

Gober said he spent much of his time touring VA facilities as a designated "spear-catcher"—When people throw darts at what the VA's doing, he's there to catch them.

"I think it's all a matter of communication," Gober said. "On the other hand, we are serving more veterans now than ever before in VA history."

Further, he claimed, "Quality is better than ever before, and we're doing it with less money."

The commission drew a visit from National Commander Anthony G. Jordan, who reaffirmed The American Legion would keep the heat on Congress and the VA over the issue of service connection for tobacco-related claims. Earlier in his remarks, Gober indicated the language initially characterizing tobacco use as "willful misconduct" had apparently been inserted in the bill by a Capitol Hill staffer and did not represent VA's view. VA hastened to distance itself from the controversial term after drawing fire from veterans' groups, especially The American Legion. The VAGeneral Counsel in 1993 issued an opinion, repeated in 1997, had not disputed veterans' eligibility to file for tobacco-related claims.

Gober pledged the VA would be working toward achieving an institutional culture that regarded America's veterans as a 25.5-million member "board of directors."

One tool that would be used in that effort would be the first 21 minutes of the Steven Spielberg film, "Saving Private Ryan." "It's been remarkable," Gober said. "I've heard young people say, 'If it weren't for these World War II vets, we wouldn't have a country.' So our new hires are going to be watching the first part of "Private Ryan" as part of their training, also "Pork Chop Hill" and some Vietnam film clips."

"We want to make sure they understand that veterans are special," Gober said. "When a veteran comes to the office, all the VA worker might see is an old man. We want them to see more than that."

That's a part of keeping veterans' issues alive in Congress and in government agencies, Gober said.

In that respect, he noted, "We might

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March of Time: Mississippi Legionnaires marched through New Orleans in 1922, the first of five convention stops the Legion has made in the Crescent City. Today's parade begins at 4 p.m. on Decatur Street in the French Quarter.

Today's Reserve means *'Re-Serve'*: Cragin

The nature of Reserve components has changed. Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs Charles L. Cragin passed this message to the joint session of the Foreign Relations and National Security Commissions. "Before the Cold War, we wouldn't have seen Reservists and National Guards members in such large numbers overseas," said Cragin.

With the drawdowns reducing the active-duty force by one-third, the increased demand for overseas commitment is being shouldered by Reserve and National Guard components. And, according to Cragin, they are serving again and again.

"The word 'reserve' should actually be pronounced *'re-serve,'* " said Cragin. "These men and women have served in the Persian Gulf, then again in Somalia, and again in Bosnia." "Weekend Warriors" is an image the Defense Department is working to strike down. No longer are these components reserve forces in waiting. They are part of the total force, said Cragin.

And no longer are they segregated by carrying pink cards. One year ago today, DoD Secretary William Cohen issued a memo instructing commanding officers to eliminate cultural barriers separating active and reserve forces. Part of developing the "integrated, seamless total force" is having every soldier carrying a green card. Over half of the total force—1.5 million—comprises of Reserve and National Guard components. In fact, reserves hold much or all of the force in military police, public affairs, medicine, transportation, civil affairs and water purification.

The biggest change on the horizon, though, will be protecting our homeland. "Future adversaries will seek to confront us, not on the battlefields of foreign lands—at the time and place of our own choosing—but here at home," said Cragin.

Recent actions in Africa, as well as within our own borders, indicate that the United States remains a target of terrorist action. Terrorists are seeking and obtaining weapons of mass destruction. They are easy to make, easy to transport, difficult to detect and lethal when used, said Cragin.

Who better to protect the nation and its citizens than Reservists and the National Guard? "They know the lay of the land, its infrastructure and its emergency response plans," noted Cragin.

Cragin distilled cyberterrorism down to a basic model. Imagine going to a supermarket to buy a loaf of bread. "If the computer went down" explained Cragin, "the cashier wouldn't know how much the loaf of bread cost and wouldn't be able to open the cash register to accept payment." Take the basic model and apply it to draining bank accounts, blacking out air traffic control screens and shutting down power grids, and that translates to modern-day warfare-cyberstyle.

Rapid Assessment and Initial Detection (RAID) Teams will be able to deploy and assist local incident commanders. The goal will be to support local authorities. If the situation requires massive federal assistance, the teams can respond in minutes or hours instead of days or weeks. □

Author of tobacco claims' opinion says keep pushing

James A. Endicott Jr. Saturday told Legionnaires of the National Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission that he never intended to become the poster child for the "smoke-'em-if-you've-got-'em" tradition of the American military.

On the other hand, his remarks made clear, he's not going to back away from the matter, either.

"The opinion rests on principles that are fairly simple and solid," he told the meeting. "And considering that the first surgeon general's warning didn't come until 1964, and that cigarettes made available to the military didn't carry warnings until long after civilian ones did, we have to consider that until a fairly recent date, people just didn't know of the hazards."

He also noted that any general council's opinion—his conclusion on service-connected tobacco claims is in the files as 2-93—is not just a number. It has a real person behind it, a veteran who needs help.

Endicott, presently vice chairman of the Texas Health Policy Council, is a decorated Vietnam veteran. He devoted a large part of his remarks to the commission to the state of veterans' advocacy in general, proposing that the nation's community of some 25.5 million veterans still had a window of opportunity to do the right thing by the nation's defenders and restore a sense of obligation to the nation's consciousness.

He said that as a Vietnam veteran, he saw a parallel between the Bill of Rights and veterans' programs.

"The Bill of Rights protects people in certain areas, such as speech, when the public might not be in a mood to vote for those rights. As a Vietnam veteran," Endicott said, "I can tell you I would have gotten nothing if it had been left to the public. Fortunately, the Montgomery GI Bill was in place, and I benefited from that."

"I think there is a window of opportunity for three or four more years, one that will then be gone forever," Endicott said. "We still have about 25 million veterans—and one last chance to put benefits for veterans on a permanent basis."

Again, he indicated, the Montgomery GI Bill is an example. Since its primary utility is as a recruiting tool, Endicott speculated that perhaps it should be part of the Department of Defense's recruiting budget. Perhaps the VA could then concentrate on treating and compensating veterans for service-connected disabilities.

Endicott said he thought veterans' advocates should, in the future, concentrate on putting names and faces to veterans' issues, citing some of the real people and problems behind the case numbers. He also suggested to the commission that veterans' advocates should be looking for the right case to bring up as a challenge to the Feres doctrine, the legal consequence of a court decision that makes it difficult for families or veterans to sue the government for injury "incident to service."

"We need some relief from that," he said, "and with the right case, the time might be right." □

Veterans' transition benefits key future recruitment

A job, educational opportunities and health care are the top three priorities for veterans leaving the armed services, says the head man of the congressional commission investigating the adequacy of veterans' transition benefits.

"A veteran without a suitable job is a veteran in a position of perpetual crisis," said Anthony J. Principi, chairman of the Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance, based in Arlington, Va.

Principi, a combat-decorated Vietnam veteran, told members of the National Economic Commission Saturday that his commission's goal is to remove bureaucratic barriers that deny newly separated veterans access to their earned benefits, and chided Congress for inadequately funding basic benefits, such as the Montgomery GI Bill.

"The GI Bill as it's presently constituted does not consistently compete with other education resources available," Principi said. He said the initial $1,200 pay-in servicemembers are required to contribute their first year in the military accounts in some measure for the fact that only 40 percent of those eligible use their GI Bill education benefits. He asked commission members and all Legionnaires to continue campaigning for upgrading Montgomery GI Bill benefit levels. "Veterans need an education, but the nation needs educated veterans in positions of leadership," Principi said.

It's important, too, that employers learn more about federal and state employment programs assisting veterans.

"In the end, only a veteran can find a job, but only an employer can hire a veteran," said Principi.

Alarmingly, noted Principi, the gradual decline of veterans in top leadership positions in Congress and the executive branch cannot bode well for veterans' benefits in the future. That dwindling number of men and women who understand first-hand veterans' transition needs make it imperative that education and employment services are available for veterans to catch up to their civilian counterparts.

After all, said Principi, education benefits are a prime incentive for enlistment and without adequate benefits quality candidates won't step forward in numbers sufficient to meet recruitment goals.

In fact, he added, all the services except the Marines are behind in recruitment this year, an ominous trend that threatens military readiness at a time when the tempo of overseas deployments are straining military resources. □

To your health: medical care available

With all the food, fun and attractions available to visitors, it's unlikely any Legion family member could ever get sick of New Orleans. But for those who become sick *in* New Orleans, help is close by.

For Legionnaires and family members in the Riverside Hilton Hotel, medical assistance is available by dialing "55" and providing the operator the location where medical assistance is required.

Emergency medical care will be provided by one of three hospitals: the New Orleans VAMC, 1601 Perido St.; phone: **568-0811**; the Touro Infirmary, 1401 Foucher St.; phone: **897-7011**; and Tulane University Medical Center, 1415 Tulane Ave.; phone: **588-5263**.

In addition, the New Orleans VA Medical Center's convention health fair will be conducted from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Tuesday and Wednesday, Sept. 8-9, in the Marlborough Rooms A&B, located on the second level of the New Orleans Riverside Hilton Hotel.

Legion family members will offer assessments for blood pressure, hearing, cholesterol screening, blood sugar, circulation and offer nutrition and prostate information. □

Extension Institute training course will be conducted in New Orleans

Those who haven't completed The American Legion Extension Institute study course will have a chance to participate in a special training course at the 80th Annual convention in New Orleans.

All current and future Post, District/County and Department leaders who haven't completed institute study are eligible to participate. The sessions will be conducted in four one-hour blocks and follow the organization of the four-volume written sub-course. Those who complete the sessions will earn four hours of American Legion Extension Institute credit.

Guest presenter for the sessions is Charlie Tyrian, a.k.a. "the World's Happiest Rhino." His presentation will appeal to the individual goals of participants and their quest to succeed as he explains the essence of the Legion from its founding, through its history and strategies for successful team-building, membership recruitment/retention and programs.

The sessions will be conducted 1-5 p.m. Monday, Sept. 7, at the Hilton Riverside Hotel, Versailles Room, on the hotel's third floor. Booksets will be available for purchases at the site.

Registration forms have been distributed throughout the Hilton Riverside Hotel, or Legionnaires can stop by the Internal Affairs Division office, Hilton Exhibition Center, 2nd level.

Convention officials also remind delegates that general convention registration and information services are available at the Hilton Riverside, on the hotel's second floor at the top of the escalator, near the Hilton Exhibition Center. Next to that booth will be a new service available to delegates: a transportation and tour desk booth, including an "On the Town" dining reservation service.

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disagree with each other on occasion, but we are not disagreeable."

One new initiative, Gober reported, was an effort to change the institutional culture and make "one VA" of the organization, whose main elements—the Veterans Health Administration, the Veterans Benefits Administration and the National Cemetery System—in the past often worked without close coordination.

West's approach, Gober told the commission, is, "If I'm going to be blamed for it [whatever happens in whatever department], we're going to be one VA."

One major area of progress, Gober said, is the opening of 600 outpatient clinics since 1996. "We've put care where it's never been before."

Gober noted that both houses of Congress had made additions to the administration's budget proposal for the VA, and that the final totals would be up to Congress's conference committees. On July 17, the Senate passed **S. 2168**, its version of VA's 1999 budget, portioning $42.5 billion for the department, $400 million more President Clinton requested.

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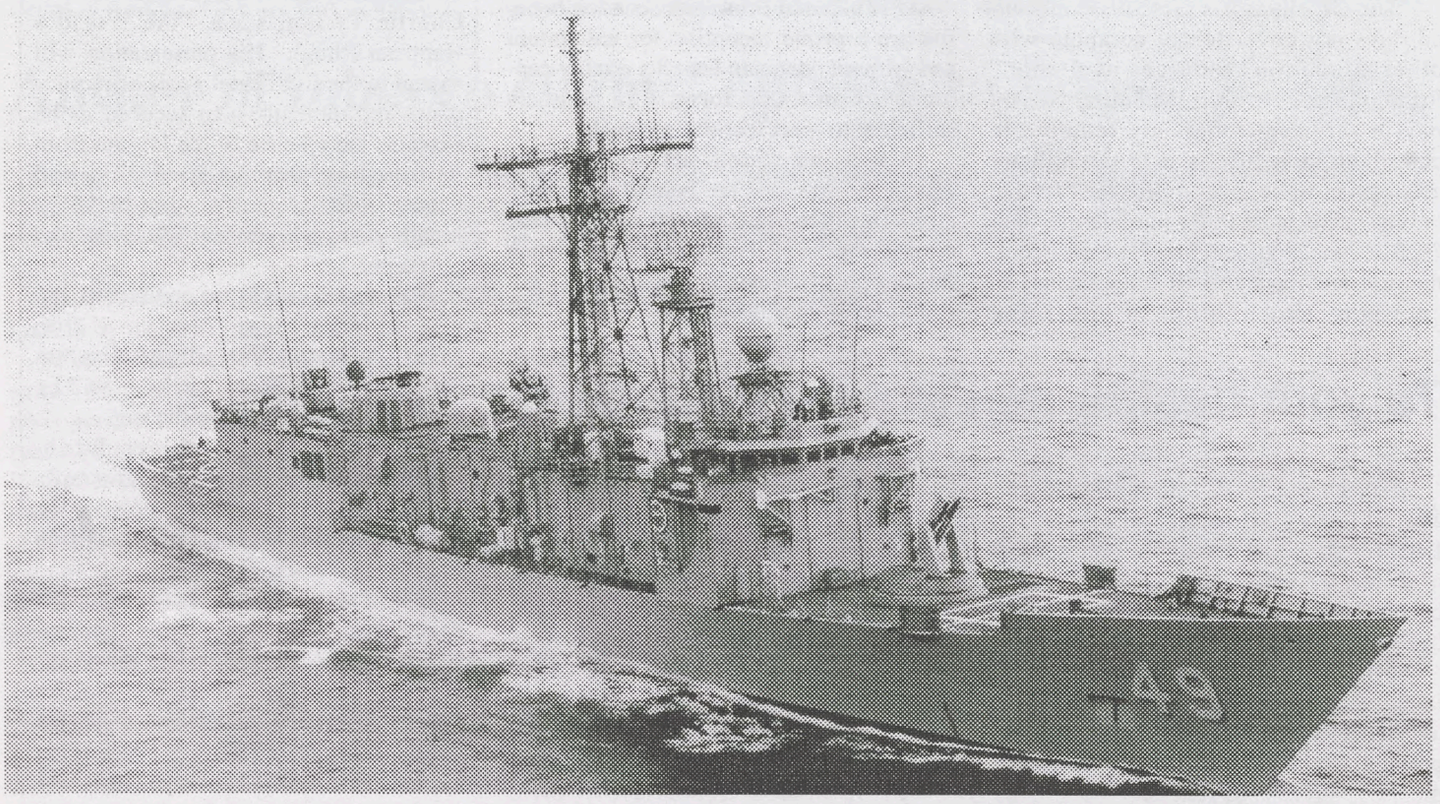
>
> *VA Deputy Secretary Hershel Gober*

Later in July, the House approved a $42.6 billion VA budget, **H.R. 4194**, which included three important amendments that raised funding levels for VA.

The amendments transferred $69 million from VA's future acquisition account to its medical care account; transferred $304 million from the Federal Housing Administration to the medical care account; and moved $21 million from AIDS funding to the State Veterans' Home Grants program.

On a key funding issue, The American Legion supports collection and retention by VA of payments for medical care made by third-party payers, such as Medicare and private insurance companies. American Legion advocates long have argued that collection of these funds by the VA Medical Care Collections Fund should supplement VA funding.

The current practice of using MCCF funds to offset discretionary appropriations penalizes veterans and their families, and robs VA of funds needed to provide care. □



The missile frigate *USS Robert G. Bradley*, will be berthed near the Hilton Riverside Hotel, near the Crescent City Bridge, and open to all Legionnaires and their guests. The vessel's open house is scheduled from 1-4 p.m. today. General ship orientation will be conducted for Legionnaires on Tuesday, Sept. 8, and Wednesday, Sept. 9. The Navy scheduled the port visit specifically to honor The American Legion as members gathered for their 80th National Convention.