



News From The ...

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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IMMEDIATE RELEASE August 31, 2011

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Remarks by Chairman Miller at the 93rd National Convention of The American Legion

To watch the speech, please click [here](#).

CHAIRMAN OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS, REP. JEFF MILLER: Thank you very much, National Commander Foster, for that gracious introduction, and let me thank and recognize your lovely wife, Rehta, for all you have both done for The American Legion. I would also like to thank the American Legion Auxiliary, especially President Carlene Ashworth, for her service. Secretary Shineski, thank you for your leadership at VA over these past two and a half years. I have enjoyed working with you, and I am proud to call you friend.

I am honored to be here at the 93rd American Legion National Convention. Thank you for inviting me, and for the warm welcome.

Two weeks ago, just two days after one of our Chinook helicopters had been shot down in Afghanistan – I stood on the tarmac at Bagram Air Base for a battlefield memorial – and witnessed what is perhaps the most solemn ceremony in the military – a ramp ceremony. Forty souls were honored that night. All died fighting a hero's fight. I stood shoulder to shoulder with members of our Armed Forces to pay our final respects to the soldiers, the Navy SEALs, and airmen as they prepared for their journey home for the last time. We stood united in our grief, in our pain, and in our anger over such a horrific loss of life.

As we watched, I reflected on one truth we must always remember – these heroes died for a Nation they loved, doing a job that they loved, knowing that their sacrifice would advance the cause of liberty. None of us should ever lose sight of that dedication to duty and to country.

Later that night, our military, with infinite resolve, continued the mission on behalf of their fallen comrades. This is what they do, day in, day out, year in and year out, as our servicemen and women have done since those early days in Lexington and Concord.

Our military and you, our veterans, are truly America's heroes. As we honor and remember each and every life that we have lost, we re-commit ourselves in shared gratitude to serve those who have served us.

It is impossible to put a price tag on freedom. But we all know that the cost of war is all too apparent. Our men and women return home carrying with them the lasting effects of war – wounds that are both visible and invisible. Some return having difficulty adjusting to civilian life. Some come back and cannot find employment in today's tough economic climate. But just as on the battlefield, these men and women continue to put others before themselves to ensure lives are made better and that the ideals they fought for in faraway lands are still cherished here at home.

It is that simple, and often forgotten, concept, which is at the heart of The American Legion. It is what you, its members, stand for, and more important, what you fight for on behalf of your fellow veterans.

Thankfully, America realized long ago that those who have worn the cloth of our Nation are owed not only a debt of gratitude, but tools to help support them when they return.

After each war and conflict, we re-evaluate the programs and services that are offered by the VA to ensure we are not only meeting the needs of today's veterans, but that we are keeping the promise for past and future generations of veterans. A promise that has not always been kept.

Today, we find ourselves in a new era. Washington has a spending problem. It is not something that happened overnight. This is not news, nor should it surprise anyone here. We need to cut up the credit cards and put America back on the path to fiscal sanity.

This summer, there was much debate on how to do just that. We have taken the first, difficult step. Elected representatives across the country need to recommit themselves to the job we were elected to do – to serve the American people. And that is exactly the message I, and my colleagues, plan to bring back to Washington when I return next week. Our Constitution is very clear in outlining how the government can tax and spend. Again, this is not a new revelation. First and foremost, the Constitution provides for spending for the common defense and providing for the welfare of our citizens. Funding for veterans' programs, I believe, is a critical element to the common defense of our country, and I believe you will see that reflected in the spending priorities in this Congress.

But while tightening our belts, we all must recognize that we still have troops on the ground fighting two wars, and more serving in other conflicts around the globe.

In the Budget Control Act of 2011, veterans' benefits and services were not affected. Veterans are still receiving their compensation check, and VA hospitals are operating as normal.

Soon, the new Select Committee will begin its work and will have to trim a minimum of \$1.2 trillion. We are out of other options. So let me state very clearly – funding for our military and veterans is, and will remain, one of this Nation's highest priorities.

This is a Joint Select Committee, established for a particular purpose for a particular time. The Deficit Reduction Committee is similar in structure to the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence or a Conference committee, which is a temporary panel of House and Senate Members, whose purpose is to reconcile differences in legislation that has passed both chambers. While the Deficit Committee has received more press and attention than other joint or select committees, it does not have any special powers. In fact, while the Joint Committee is only comprised of 12 Members of Congress, all Members of Congress, House and Senate Committees, and yes, the American people, can play an active role in the Committee's process. All recommendations from the committee will have to pass both bodies of Congress and be signed by the President before becoming law.

Coming to agreement will not be easy. You will hear a lot of rhetoric from the media and from special interest groups. But as Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I promise to you that I will not only fight for America's veterans, but that I will stand steadfast in ensuring that America's veterans are not used as political pawns in this process.

I will be proactive in keeping our veterans informed with the *facts* in the coming months, and we will provide information on the progress of the Select Committee.

But just as important as getting our fiscal house in order, is putting our American veterans back to work. Our veterans in every state across the country deserve better than to stand in unemployment lines.

I have pledged to help reduce veteran unemployment in veterans' communities by half – lowering it to less than 5 percent over the next two years – a rate we have not experienced since 2007.

To do this, I introduced comprehensive veterans' jobs legislation bill this July – the “[Veterans Opportunity to Work Act of 2011](#)” or the VOW Act. The VOW Act will ensure that we have the most trained, most skilled workforce since World War II. Our soldiers, Marines, sailors, airmen, and Coastguardsmen returning from Afghanistan and Iraq face higher unemployment than the national average. While our older veterans, who make up two-thirds of the currently unemployed, are faced with a changing job market.

In total, nearly 1 million veterans are out of work. I am sure all of you agree this is unacceptable.

The Committee has been focused on this issue for much of this year and I would like to commend the President for joining us in this fight in making veteran employment a priority.

The VOW Act has five pillars:

First, we must enhance the Transition Assistance Program, which provides career counseling. TAP will be mandatory for all separating servicemembers, and we will also ensure it is effective in meeting the needs of our veterans in the 21st Century.

Second, we all know that education is one of the keys to success. Right now, 48 percent of veterans using Montgomery and Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits are enrolled in 4-year colleges and universities. But we need to make sure our Vietnam, Cold War, and Persian Gulf era veterans also have opportunities to advance in the workplace. Therefore, under the VOW Act, 100,000 veterans of past eras can receive up to one-year of Montgomery GI Bill benefits to re-train for careers in this new and ever-changing marketplace.

Third, when members of the National Guard and Reserve are called to duty, their employer must keep their position open until they return and must not discriminate against them based on their Guard and Reserve status. Too often this is not the case. So, we will strengthen the protections provided by the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA). We must be willing to defend veterans' rights, even when others are unwilling to do so.

Fourth, despite America's military having the best-trained professionals in the world, the inability to be credentialed or licensed in their equivalent civilian field when they return home prevents these men and women from obtaining meaningful and gainful employment in their area of expertise. Some of these professions include combat medics, truck drivers, and aircraft technicians, to name a few. Our states hold the key to breaking down this barrier. I have been working with several governors and governors' associations, as well as the Department of Labor, to create uniform standards to ease this transition from active duty to civilian life. A combat medic who has seen the worst of war in Iraq or Afghanistan is surely qualified to be an EMT here at home.

And lastly, I have introduced a bill providing meaningful tax incentives for small businesses that hire unemployed veterans, which will not only provide capital for the business, which spurs growth, but also protects the veteran from being a mere tax break hire – a trick we often see.

And as important as its other features, the VOW Act does not increase the deficit one penny. I would like to thank The American Legion for their support of this legislation. Many of these proposals were supported by The American Legion's National Economic Division, and we would not be where we are today without their help.

But as you know, as I know, and the President knows, the government's role is not to create jobs. But what the government can do is create the right environment for the job market itself to flourish. And we do this by reducing the burden of overreaching regulations that encumber America's small businesses, the engine of our economy. In other words, your government needs to get the hell out of the way of the economy, get the boot off the back of small businesses, and let the engine roar.

The time for talk is over, we must act. We need to do it quickly. I encourage each of you to read the bill, available on the Committee's website at Veterans.House.Gov and let your elected officials back home know what you think. I look forward to the President signing the VOW Act into law as soon as possible.

While we get our veterans back to work, we cannot and must not forget those who are suffering with the invisible wounds of war – post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury. These can be some of the hardest wounds to treat. But we can, and we will, help these men and women get on a path to recovery. That was, and still is, the mission of the VA – to heal our veterans and provide them with the support necessary to lead full and productive lives. Today, we face a choice. Either we take action to address the deficiencies in the current system, which many opt out of before even receiving treatment, or we maintain the status quo. The status quo, with a rising suicide rate is not an option and is unacceptable to me.

This summer, a veteran of the Marine Corps testified before the full Committee. He told us that he took the money from VA for PTSD treatment and spent it on alcohol and other vices. It was not until this young man hit rock bottom that he reached out to somebody for help. But instead of going to the VA, he turned to a private organization, right here in Minnesota. In 15 months, he had his life back. He courageously fought his demons and came back a stronger Marine.

We must find ways to reach these men and women and provide them with the support that they need. We need to transform the culture of VA so that all veterans feel welcome. Again, this will not be easy task, but I believe it can, and must, be done. It is incumbent upon all of us to reach out to those who are in pain and to get them as well as possible, instead of masking symptoms with drugs. Each of us has the ability to help – especially in our own communities.

Legislation is about partnerships. The American Legion's Washington team is one of the finest. You should be very proud of the work they do on your behalf in the Nation's capital. Next month, we will welcome The American Legion to Washington for its annual legislative hearing before the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees.

And this year, our Committee will continue its aggressive oversight of VA to ensure taxpayer dollars are not only being spent wisely, but are spent on veterans' needs, not bureaucracy. We must also turn the corner on the shameful disability compensation claims backlog. We have heard too many promises for too many years, and this Congress *will* turn the corner and make VA accountable to ensure accuracy the first time a claim is submitted.

We also want to hear from veterans and their families across the country and help find solutions to problems within the system. Therefore, we want to hear from each of you – whether it be visiting our office personally, calling us on the phone, sending us an email, or reaching out on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com).

These issues are not partisan issues. They are veteran issues, and that is exactly as it should be.

I would like to share with you a quote, borrowed from General Omar Bradley, a former VA Secretary. He stated quite bluntly in 1947, “We are dealing with veterans, not procedures – with their problems, not ours.” I promise to each of you here today, I will not let bureaucracy, red tape, or political brinksmanship stand in the way of caring for America’s veterans during my tenure as Chairman. YOU are my first priority.

This country’s commitment to our veterans will never waiver. Nor will mine.

I applaud each of you, and your families, for your service to our great Nation, and to The American Legion.

God Bless you, and God Bless America.

For more information on the VOW Act, please visit: Veterans.House.Gov/Jobs

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