

But I think the most valuable part of the report is the wide selection of direct quotes from some of our most respected military commanders.

I would like to share a few of these observations—all of them made by American commanders with far more military expertise than I would ever claim to possess.

Taken together, they make what I believe is a convincing case for American leadership on—and, if necessary, participation in—a significantly beefed-up international peacemaking force to be deployed at various sites throughout Afghanistan.

On American involvement in multinational peace operations:

The nation that has the most influence . . . has to play a number of roles. Peacekeeping, peacemaking or peace enforcement is one of those roles. To walk away from those responsibilities, in my judgement, is to invite questioning of your overall leadership character. As a result, people will start to question you and your resolve for the principles for which you stand.

Gen. James Jones, Commandant of the Marine Corps.

If the United States doesn't participate, the United States can't lead . . . You can't ask other nations to take risks that you won't take yourself.

Gen Wesley Clark, Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (1997–2000).

In order for us to have influence, we must be engaged . . . If you're not there on the ground . . . you are not able to really influence what's happening on the ground.

Maj. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, commander of a NATO multinational brigade in Kosovo, 1999–2000.

Whether we like it or not, we're the big dog. If someone calls 911, . . . it's the United States of America that answers.

Air Force Lt. Gen. Robert Fogelsong, Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, 1997–1999.

I do not believe that any major humanitarian or peacekeeping effort can be successful, long-term, without the support of the U.S.

Gen. Peter Pace, USMC, now Vice-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, then CinC of South Com. On unit morale.

The re-enlistment numbers are far higher in units in Bosnia and Kosovo than they are in units of the U.S. army overall.

Air Force Gen. Joseph Ralston, Supreme Allied Commander, Europe.

The re-enlistment rates in [US Army, Europe], which has been involved to the greatest extent in peacekeeping operations in the Balkans, are the highest in the Army.

Gen. Montgomery Meigs, commander of NATO's force in Bosnia (SFOR), 1998–1999.

Gen. Jones, Lt. Gen. Fogelsong, & Adm. Dennis Blair say the same thing for Marines, Air Force, and Navy.

Forget the baloney about people being upset about being down range . . . morale's higher than in garrison.

Gen. Meigs (Bosnia)

Troops that deploy to Bosnia and Kosovo and other operations like that, have high morale . . . our troops are happiest, morale is highest, when they are out in the world doing what they signed up to do.

Gen. Tommy Franks, CinC of CentCom, now commander of the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan.

On unit readiness and military training.

I feel very strongly that our operation, let's say in Kosovo, is a very positive net effect for the following reasons. The training that the young NCO and younger officer gets is far superior to what he or she would be getting if they were in Germany—because they are dealing with real world problems, 24 hours a day . . . That's what being a troop leader is all about. Their individual, small unit skills, squad level, company, battalion—it's far better training than what they get back in garrison.

Gen. Joseph Ralston

The small unit leader's development in peace operations is phenomenal.

Gen. Meigs—The type of training that isn't available during peace operations is brigade and division level training, but Gen. Ralston notes that this large-scale training is given to troops on a relatively infrequent basis—typically only once every year and a half. He notes that when troops who have served in peace operations are put back in the regular training cycle, they have no troubling picking up where they left off.

The words of these American soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines say it far better than I can. The military and strategic objectives of the United States are often best served by American troops participating in multinational peace operations.

I am not saying we should send U.S. soldiers on such missions merely for their training or diplomatic value. I AM saying that we should recognize the pro's as well as the con's of U.S. involvement in peace operations.

Yes, there are dangers—as President Bush has said, the war against terror will be long, and there will be casualties in the months and years ahead. But the dangers of abdication of our responsibilities is far greater than the dangers of leadership.

We must stay the course in Afghanistan—the whole world is watching. Friends and enemies alike want to know whether we'll follow through in Afghanistan, and if we fail to follow through here, how can we ever convince them that we'll follow through in Yemen, the Philippines, or Indonesia—let alone in Iraq.

But that is the topic for another day.

TAKING CARE OF OUR NATION'S VETERANS

Mr. JOHNSON. Mr. President, over the last few weeks, I have had the honor of meeting with a number of veterans, both here in Washington and in South Dakota. Every time I meet with them, I am reminded of the tremendous sacrifices they have made on behalf of our country. We owe each of them a debt of gratitude that can never be fully repaid.

One of the things we must do for our veterans is honor our past promises.

For decades, the men and women who joined the military were promised educational benefits and lifetime health care for themselves and their families. Those commitments have too often not been kept, and I am concerned this is starting to threaten our national security. Veterans are our Nation's most effective recruiters. However, inadequate education benefits and poor health care options make it difficult for these men and women to encourage the younger generation to join today's voluntary service.

In my meetings with veterans, the issue of greatest concern is health care. They want assurances that they will be able to access quality care. Unfortunately, years of inadequate funding for veterans health care has pushed the VA health system to the brink of crisis, and the quality of care is starting to suffer. Let me be clear, this has nothing to do with the men and women who work in the VA health system. They are dedicated professionals who care about the veterans they serve, but they are being asked to do too much with too few resources.

Veterans were very optimistic when the President mentioned his commitment to veterans health care in the State of the Union address in January. At first glance, it looked as though the President's budget had made a significant effort to fix the mounting funding problems at the VA. But after budget gimmicks, such as \$800 million that was included for the first time in the VA budget for federal employees' retirements, the amount of funding that the President has recommended for veterans health care falls far short of the promised \$2.2 billion increase. Instead, it is only about \$1.4 billion more than last year.

I am pleased that the Senate Budget Committee, of which I am a member, has recently approved a budget resolution that will provide \$1.2 billion more than was requested by the Bush administration for VA health care and \$2.6 billion more than was approved in fiscal year 2002. I am hopeful that this level of funding will go a long way toward addressing the critical funding needs in VA health care.

While there is good news about the health care budget, I am concerned about a provision in the President's budget that would establish a \$1,500 deductible for Category 7 veterans. Under this new policy, a veteran would be forced to pay for 45 percent of his or her medical care, up to a limit of \$1,500 per year. The VA estimates that 121,000 veterans will choose not to be treated at the VA next year if the proposal becomes law. This would include several thousand in South Dakota. I know this is an attempt to ask veterans who make more money to contribute more to their own health care. However, the way in which the VA determines Category 7 status is unfair, particularly to many veterans in South Dakota. Category 7 veterans are those who lack a disability related to their military

service or whose income is higher than the current VA eligibility standards. The current income standard is \$24,000 annually for a single, or \$28,000 for a couple, and applies to 40 percent of the veterans in South Dakota. Assets, such as land, are included in the calculation of income. This is a concern for many farmers and ranchers in my state who may own land worth a considerable amount, but whose actual yearly income is well below the VA threshold. The administration's proposal to impose a \$1,500 co-pay on all Category 7 veterans would be particularly onerous on these veterans.

I would also like to note the concern some veterans have raised about a new VA regulation that increases the price of prescription drugs from \$2 to \$7 a month. Seven dollars a month for a prescription is still relatively inexpensive, and given the lack of prescription benefits under Medicare, many older veterans still benefit greatly from this VA service. However, when you look at longer waits for appointments, cuts in VA services, and the proposed \$1,500 co-pay for Category 7 veterans, this increase in prescription costs is seen as yet another example of the erosion of veterans benefits.

One of the positive steps in VA health care has been the shift away from a health system based on lengthy, in-patient hospital stays, to a system focused on preventative, outpatient care. This shift has vastly improved patient care. It has also proven to be popular with veterans, as demonstrated by the large numbers currently utilizing the Community Based Outpatient Clinics, CBOCs. These community based clinics are particularly important in rural States like South Dakota. By placing clinics in local communities, we increase access to care by cutting down the amount of time a veteran must spend travelling. Greater access to nearby care means veterans are likely to seek medical attention before an illness becomes a major health problem.

This new access to clinics was threatened in South Dakota when budgetary constraints prompted the VA to put a moratorium on enrollment in CBOCs in Aberdeen, Rapid City, and Pierre. This caused concern among veterans in the areas around the clinics who were told their only option for health care was a multiple hour drive away. After working closely with the VA, the enrollment caps appear to have been lifted. I will continue to monitor this situation and will work with Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony Principi to ensure all eligible veterans continue to have access to these clinics.

I believe we in the Senate should commit to making this the year we finally address the issue of concurrent receipt of military retirement benefits. Under current law, military retirees cannot receive both full military retirement pay and full VA disability compensation. Instead, retirement payments are reduced by the amount re-

ceived in disability compensation. Changing the law to allow for concurrent receipt of benefits is an issue of basic fairness because both military retirement pay and VA disability compensation are earned benefits. Retirement pay comes after at least 20 years of dedicated service in the Armed Forces and VA disability is earned as a result of injury during time of service.

I have been working with South Dakota veterans and my colleagues in the Senate for several years to fix this problem. Last year, the Senate adopted an amendment to both the fiscal year 2002 budget resolution and to the fiscal year 2002 Defense authorization bill to include funding to correct this problem. Unfortunately, despite strong support in the Senate, the language to allow concurrent receipt was removed from last year's budget resolution during the conference with the House of Representatives. In the Defense authorization bill, Congress agreed to allow concurrent receipt, but only if the administration included authorizing legislation as a part of the fiscal year 2003 budget request.

I was very disappointed to discover that the President's fiscal year 2003 budget request did not include provisions for concurrent receipt. I recently sent a letter to the President expressing my regret at his decision not to address concurrent receipt and asking him to work with Congress to address this urgent matter. I am very pleased that the Senate version of the fiscal year 2003 budget resolution includes a provision to phase in full concurrent receipt for veterans who are 60–100 percent disabled as a result of their military service. This is only a first step, but a positive step. At a time in which we are asking more and more from the men and women serving in the military, we should be looking for ways to encourage them to make a career in the military by improving benefits and assuring them they will be taken care of in retirement.

Another priority for me is improving educational benefits for veterans. Unfortunately, the current GI bill fails to keep pace with the rising costs of higher education. Less than one-half of the men and women who contribute \$1,200 of their pay to qualify for the GI bill actually use these benefits. Last year, I joined Senator SUSAN COLLINS in introducing legislation to bring the GI bill into the 21st century by creating a benchmark level of education benefits that automatically covers inflation to meet the increasing costs of higher education. Our concept is a very simple one; at the very least, GI bill benefits should be equal to the average cost of a commuter student attending a 4-year university. The Montgomery GI bill has been one of the most effective tools in recruiting and retaining the best and the brightest in the military. It has also been a critical component in the transition of veterans to civilian life. It is imperative that the Senate passes this legislation this session.

I am also pleased to be a sponsor of two other very important bills that will honor the commitments we have made to our veterans.

S. 1644, The Veterans Memorial Preservation and Recognition Act, will protect all veterans memorials on public property by extending current criminal penalties for destruction of property to any statue, plaque, or monument commemorating veterans. The bill also creates a restoration fund—to which individuals or organization can contribute—to repair and maintain our Nation's veterans memorials. Finally, the bill authorizes States to place supplemental guide signs for veterans cemeteries on Federal-aid highways.

I am also an original cosponsor of S. 2003, the Veterans Benefits and Pensions Protection Act. This bill will help protect veterans from unscrupulous predatory lending. The VA currently prohibits the direct sale of veterans pension or disability benefits. However, certain companies are exploiting a loophole in the law that allows them to enter into contracts with veterans to offer them "instant cash" in exchange for future benefit payments. In essence, a veteran agrees to sign away his or her benefits for a selected amount of time, and in exchange, the company agrees to pay the veteran a lump sum of money. Frequently, this ranges from only 30 to 40 cents on the dollar. The veteran is then required to open a joint bank account with the company in which the benefits are directly deposited and the company makes the withdrawal. Veterans are often also required to take out life insurance, payable to the company, or use their homes as collateral.

S. 2003 will close this loophole and authorize education programs to inform veterans about the danger of this scam. The bill has been endorsed by the Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Vietnam Veterans of America, and AMVETS.

Mr. President, there are few things more important than those who serve our country in the Armed Forces. As a nation, we need to take care of these men and women, not only while they wear the uniform, but also when they become veterans. I look forward to continuing to work on behalf of the veterans of South Dakota and the Nation.

GREEK INDEPENDENCE DAY

Mr. REED. Mr. President, I rise today to recognize the 181st anniversary of Greek Independence that will be celebrated Monday, March 25. Not unlike our founding fathers who sowed the seeds of the American revolution by forming the underground society, the "Sons of Liberty," Greek patriots seeking democracy established the "Friendly Society" in Odessa in 1814. Their ideals spread and the Greek people eventually rose up on March 25, 1821. This day would mark the beginning of an 8 year struggle against the might of the Ottoman Empire which