

WASHINGTON WEEKLY
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1. Iraq War Ends: The Iraq War ended yesterday, though about 4,000 troops are still left to redeploy before the end of the year. More than 1.5 million American servicemen and women have served in-theater since March 2003, many of whom will carry visible and invisible scars of war for a lifetime. The end of the Iraq War fulfills a campaign promise by President Obama, but with almost 100,000 troops still stationed in Afghanistan, the war on terrorism is far from finished, which means the VFW's veterans' service, legislative and grassroots troop support programs are even more important. Read more at <http://www.vfw.org/News-and-Events/Articles/VFW-WELCOMES-HOME-IRAQI-VETS/>.

2. NDAA Conference Update: House and Senate conferees agreed this week to provisions in the National Defense Authorization Act of 2012, or NDAA. The bill will provide \$530 billion for the Defense Department and \$115.5 billion for the war in Afghanistan and end of operations in Iraq. The VFW has been staunchly against any TRICARE fee increase, and was instrumental in defeating a Senate proposal to tie increases to the percentage of medical inflation, but the NDAA does include a provision to link future increases to future cost-of-living allowances. One controversial measure the VFW was happy to see dropped from the bill was the requirement to evaluate changing the current military retirement system. Other key provisions in the final bill include:

- A 1.6 percent across the board increase in pay, and an average 2 percent increase in housing allowances.
- Increases in incentive and imminent danger pays.
- Changes in DOD requirements for retaining Military Sexual Trauma records.
- Mental health assessments for Reserve Components during training.
- Elevating the Chief of the National Guard Bureau to a permanent member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (which accomplishes VFW Resolution #435).
- Requiring DOD to report to Congress on health risks associated with future usage of open-air burn pits.

Other VFW-supported items were stripped from the Conference Report because of House and/or Senate disagreements, to include repealing the SBP/DIC offset, and creating a Cold War Service Medal. To see how your members voted, go to <http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2011/roll932.xml>. For a complete summary of the NDAA conference report, click on <http://rules.house.gov/Legislation/legislationDetails.aspx?NewsID=650>.

3. House Subcommittee Discusses VOW Act: The House VA Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity held an oversight hearing on the implementation of the recently passed *VOW to Hire Heroes Act*. VFW was a strong supporter and instrumental in getting the comprehensive jobs bill passed last month. Committee members remarked on the complexity of the bill and that many of the provisions will have to be collaborated between VA and the Department of Labor Veterans Employment and Training Services. Subcommittee Chairman Marlin Stutzman (R-Ind.) told VA and DOL representatives that he will hold more hearings to examine the progress being made. The VFW will continue to closely monitor the law and how each department moves ahead in administering the benefits to veterans so they can find employment and the right career path for their skills.

4. Compensated Work Therapy Program Review: This week, the House VA Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations reviewed VA's Compensated Work Therapy Program, or CWT. CWT is part of the Vocational Rehabilitation service and is designed to provide veterans with PTSD, TBI, and other head injuries with skills training, job development, placement services, and employment support. Dr. Anthony Campinell, the director of the Therapeutic and Supported Employment Programs for VHA, stressed that CWT serves as a complement to other employment services available within VBA, the Department of Labor, and/or state employment agencies. More than 41,000 veterans received CWT services at 187 locations in FY2011. For more information on hearings for the week or the recorded webcast, visit the House VA committee website at <http://veterans.house.gov/>.

5. VFW Helps Close USERRA Loophole: With the help and support of VFW's legislative advocates, Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.) introduced a bill this week to close a loophole that exempts Transportation Security Administration officials from granting USERRA protections to their Guard and Reserve employees. When TSA was created after 9/11, Congress exempted TSA administrators from a series of labor protections, including USERRA, in an effort to quickly deploy the new homeland security force. More than 10 years after the creation of TSA, the VFW believes it is time to close this loophole to protect service members and veterans that may choose to work for TSA. To learn more about the bill, go to <http://www.vfwonthehill.org/2011/12/vfw-helps-close-userra-loophole.html>.

6. VFW Joins CBS, Google to Film Holiday Troop Messages: This week, VFW's Washington office joined CBS and Google to help film shout-outs to the troops from members of Congress in time for Christmas and the holiday season. This project is part of a larger partnership between CBS, Google and the VFW. To see who stopped by the VFW Washington Office and to view their greetings, go to <http://www.vfwonthehill.org/2011/12/vfw-joins-cbs-and-google-to-film.html>.