

# Memorial Day: Putting Our Troops and Veterans First

Contributed by Congressman Bob Filner  
Sunday, 24 May 2009

Each year on Memorial Day, Americans come together to remember those who have sacrificed their lives on behalf of our country in the name of freedom and democracy around the world. The debt owed to them is immeasurable. Their sacrifices and those of their military families are freedom's foundation. Indeed, without the brave efforts of all the soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines and Coast Guardsmen and their families, our country would not stand so boldly, shine so brightly and live so freely.

On this Memorial Day, we continue to be engaged in hostilities, and young men and women may pay the ultimate price while wearing the uniform of the nation. Let us support and pay tribute to our courageous troops currently serving in Iraq, Afghanistan, and around the globe, who are the veterans of tomorrow.

All Americans honor the memory of the more than 4,000 Americans who have died in Iraq and more than 600 who have died in Afghanistan. We will also honor the wounded: more than 31,000 U.S. troops in Iraq and nearly 3,000 in Afghanistan.

As we honor the fallen, we must take this opportunity to renew our efforts to keep our promises to the troops of today and the 24 million American veterans of today and tomorrow.

To honor our troops and veterans during this economic crisis, Congress has enacted and implemented critical measures to expand economic opportunity and relief. Many of our troops have served multiple tours of duty, with great strain on their families and often at a cost to their financial futures. We are now implementing a new Post 9 11 GI Bill to restore a full, four year college education, to allow up to 2 million warriors of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to be part of a new American economic recovery, just like after World War II. The original GI Bill launched millions of families on a course of prosperity and toward achieving the American Dream and we can do that again with this New GI bill that takes effect in August. Troops and veterans can begin to sign up now. Veterans coming home facing double-digit unemployment, so this Congress has worked for job creation for veterans with incentives for businesses to hire unemployed veterans, while providing nearly 2 million disabled veterans a \$250 payment to help make ends meet, as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

Also, with the strong support of the veterans' organizations, this Congress has made an unprecedented commitment to veterans' health care. This year's veterans' budget, hailed as a "cause for celebration," provides veterans' health care and other services the largest funding increase ever requested by a President — even more than veterans' organizations requested. Not only will this expand mental health screening and treatment, vital to the many veterans suffering from PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury, it will end the Bush Administration ban on enrolling modest income veterans for VA health care and pave the way for sufficient, timely and predictable funding. This year's veterans' budget builds on the 40 percent increase for VA since January 2007 — including the largest single increase in the 78 year history of the VA — which has strengthened quality health care for more than 5 million veterans — adding more than 8,000 new doctors and nurses — and has been critical to meeting the needs of the 363,000 veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan in need of care over the last two years.

Returning troops need better care to successfully rebuild their lives here at home. In 2007, Congress enacted the Wounded Warriors Assistance Act to address the problems and gaps in care at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and other military health care facilities. This measure is being carried out with the recently announced implementation of electronic health records to give service members a single, accurate, paperless health records to smooth the transition from the Armed Forces to the VA system.

The New Direction Congress is also strengthening our military and addressing the worst military readiness crisis since the Vietnam War. Last year's bipartisan defense authorization boosted our force strength and bolstered our readiness so we can defend our national interests anywhere around the globe - and we can provide the best training and equipment for the men and women serving in our Armed Forces. Congress is working on a supplemental war funding bill that provides our troops in harm's way in Iraq and Afghanistan with everything they need, including much needed Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles to protect our troops.

Under Democratic leadership, Congress is also keeping our promises to our troops and their families. Last year, we increased military pay by 3.9 percent — more than President Bush’s request; kept health care cost down for military retirees and their families by preventing TRICARE fee increases; and made progress in reducing the backlog and waits for veterans to access earned benefits. This year, we are providing payments for more than 170,000 service members and veterans forced to serve under stop loss orders since 2001, while investing in building new transition centers for wounded warriors returning from combat, more military child care centers, and better barracks and military family housing. And for the survivors of those who have served our country, we are taking steps to end the Military Families Tax, which reduces survivor benefits for 55,000, mostly widows of those who died from service connected injuries.

Politics and partisanship should never be a factor in our support for American veterans or troops. On the battlefield, the military pledges to leave no soldier behind. As a nation, let it be our pledge that when they return home, we leave no veteran behind.

Let us honor their service with actions that fulfill our commitment to our troops, their families, and our veterans — and that are worthy of our grateful nation. We must celebrate, honor, and remember these courageous and faithful men and women by restoring the promise of the GI Bill, strengthening our military, keeping our promises to our troops and families, and improving veterans’s health care. That is our moral obligation as we honor those who have fallen on this Memorial Day.

Congressman Bob Filner - Representative for California’s 51st Congressional District - Chair of the House of Representatives Committee on Veterans’s Affairs