

RAO BULLETIN

15 March 2021

PDF Edition



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1. The page number on which an article can be found is provided to the left of each article's title
2. To read the articles open the website and slew to the page number of the article you are interested in.
3. Numbers contained within brackets [] indicate the number of articles written on the subject. To obtain previous articles send a request to raoemo@sbcglobal.net 'or' raoemo77@gmail.com
4. Recipients of the Bulletin are authorized and encouraged to forward the Bulletin are articles to other vets or veteran organizations

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U.S. China Military Tensions

Update 04: Marines Downgrade Russia Threat to Focus on China

The Marine Corps commandant has for the first time put Russia alongside Iran, North Korea, and extremist groups as areas that will “continue to pose threats,” while elevating China to the undisputed top of threats facing US policy makers. “China will remain the pacing threat for the next decade,” Berger wrote in the memo obtained by Breaking Defense, a point he has made before while usually including Russia as a close second.

The ordering of the Marine Corps’ threat picture over the next decade marks a major downgrade for how the Corps sees Russia, though Gen. David Berger’s 23 FEB memo to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin largely maintains the major internal reforms he’s pushed over the past two years. Those efforts, which include divesting of the Corps’ inventory of Abrams tanks and shedding 12,000 Marines, has been aimed at reinventing the Corps for operations across the expanses of the Pacific. In a joint op-ed with Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. CQ Brown just last month, they wrote that to “compete with the People’s Republic of China and Russia and successfully address other emergent challenges, the U.S. military requires a new framework for assessing readiness. It should focus less on near-term availability and more on future capability and warfighting advantage over peer adversaries.”

While Russia is formidable, it appears that Berger is no longer looking at Moscow as a peer adversary his troops will have to deal with as they operate primarily in the Pacific. “We will face both China and other competitors employing sophisticated, multi-domain strategies,” in the Pacific he added, and his 27,000 Marines in the region “require significant modernization and redesign.” But, as he has said for the past year, Berger informed Austin he’s not asking for more money to do so. “I have not asked for any topline increase for the Marine Corps – only that we be allowed to reinvest the savings we create by

divesting of legacy capabilities and excess capacity,” he wrote, suggesting that he needs the authority to retire older equipment and shrink the size of the force to modernize the way he envisions.

That will likely come as good news for the new Pentagon leadership, which is working on the 2022 budget while operating under a flat topline that will likely remain consistent with the past two years. “We are fielding long-endurance unmanned air vehicles and appropriate payloads for airborne communication, reconnaissance, and electronic warfare as rapidly as possible using the savings from such divestments,” the memo reports. “Additional planned divestments include more of our towed cannon artillery along with significant numbers of manned fixed and rotary wing aircraft. We are also phasing out much of our legacy logistical capacity, previously intended for sustained land operations, while modernizing the rest for distributed maritime operations.”

Last year, Berger questioned how many F-35s the Marines could sustain in the coming years, calling for a smaller squadrons, cutting them from 16 to 10. Current plans call for the Marines to buy 353 of the F-35B and 67 of the F-35C carrier variants. Whether this is the beginning of a plan to buy fewer aircraft remains unclear. [Source: Breaking Defense | Paul McLeary | March 02, 2021 ++]

NGAD Program

Air Force General Worried US Won't Field Sixth-Gen Fighter in Time to Beat China



Since September, when the U.S. Air Force disclosed that it had flown a full-scale demonstrator of its future fighter, the defense community has been hungry for more details about the Next Generation Air Dominance (NGAD) program. And Air Force leaders have been loathe to provide them. That’s what made unprompted comments by Air Combat Command head Gen. Mark Kelly so surprising during a 26 FEB roundtable with reporters.

During the event, none of the 20-something journalists gathered ventured to ask Kelly about the NGAD program. But as the session drew to a close, Kelly decided to share his thoughts anyway. “I for one am confident that the technology and the test points have developed to where NGAD technology will get fielded,” he said. “And I’m confident that the adversaries on the other end of this technology will suffer a very tough day and tough week and tough war. What I don’t know — and we’re working with our great

partners — is if our nation will have the courage and the focus to field this capability before someone like the Chinese fields it and uses it against us.”

Kelly declined to comment on how close the Air Force is to fielding NGAD — typical of the mystery surrounding the program. While much remains unknown about the effort, Air Force leaders have said it’s a “family of systems” that could include manned aircraft, drones or other advanced capabilities, rather than a traditional fighter in the mode of the F-16 or F-35. But its unclear how many NGAD demonstrators now exist and which companies manufactured them. Practically every detail about its performance is also classified. “It’s a keen focus, a keen capability,” Kelly said of NGAD. “We just need to make sure we keep our narrative up and articulate the biggest benefit we’ve had as a nation — to have leading-edge technology ensuring we have air superiority for the nation and the joint force.”

Kelly’s comments may portend that the program is at a turning point where more funding is needed to accelerate its development and fielding timeline. Lawmakers have been somewhat tepid to the program thus far, funding \$904 million of the Air Force’s \$1.044 billion request in fiscal 2021. The service previously received \$905 million for the program in FY20. In the FY21 defense policy bill, Congress also mandated that the Pentagon’s independent Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation office conduct a study on Air Force and Navy future fighter programs, including on NGAD’s technology, cost and business case. [Source: DefenseNews | Valerie Insinna | February 26, 2021 ++]

Global Defense Spending Hits New High Led by US and China



The U.S. and China led the growth in global defense spending, which hit a new high in 2020 despite the economic stress brought on by the coronavirus pandemic, a report said 25 FEB. In its annual report on military power, the International Institute for Strategic Studies said total military expenditures added up to \$1.83 trillion in 2020, a 3.9% increase over the previous year. “This came despite the coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent contraction in global economic output,” the London-based think tank said in a statement.

The United States remained the top spender, accounting for 40.3% of global spending. But China and other Asian powers concerned about Beijing’s rise also spent more, albeit at a somewhat slower pace than in 2019 because of the pandemic, IISS said in its “Military Balance” report. In Asia, overall spending was up 4.3%, down from the 4.9% growth rate of the previous year. Beijing boosted expenditures by \$12 billion, or 5.2 %, with total spending at \$193.3 billion. However, IISS and other research groups have questioned China’s budget transparency in recent years. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute pegged Chinese defense spending at \$261 billion in 2019.

China's maritime paramilitary forces are using facilities in the South China Sea as forward operating bases, the report noted. China has also built artificial islands in the sea over the last decade and constructed bases on natural features claimed by other nations in the region. "Beijing seems intent on achieving primacy in its littoral areas," IISS said. Meanwhile, China's navy has maintained an "over-the-horizon" presence focused on extending its reach. China's corvette numbers have more than doubled in the last five years, reaching 55 in 2020, IISS said. Beijing is also boosting its anti-submarine warfare capabilities while expanding its fleets of transport ships and heavy transport aircraft.

After the U.S. and China, the top spenders were India, Britain and Russia. Total Russian military expenditure was set to fall from over 4.1% of gross domestic product in 2020 to under 3.8% of GDP by 2023, the report said. Defense spending among Europe's NATO members has increased by nearly 20% since 2014, which is when allies began boosting expenditures after years of budget declines. The increases came after Russia's intervention in Ukraine, which sparked new security concerns in Europe. European defense spending grew 2% last year, compared to a 4.1% boost in 2019. IISS said it appears NATO allies remain committed to increasing their defense budgets in 2021 and beyond, signaling an "intention to avoid the cuts that followed the 2007-08 financial crisis." "If these spending plans continue on their current trajectory, in 2021 Europe could be the region with the fastest growth in global defense spending," IISS reported. [Source: Stars & Stripes | John Vandiver | February 25, 2021 ++]

Toxic Wounds Registries

Veterans Affairs Committees Asked to Submit Legislation

"From Vietnam to the present-day, members of the U.S. military have been exposed to toxic elements, at home and abroad, that have killed more people than our enemies," said John Rowan, National President, Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), in testimony 4 MAR before the Joint Session of House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees. "What has made the situation more disgraceful," noted Rowan, "is our government hid the negative aspects of these toxic substances from everyone serving in these areas and fought their claims with the VA for many years." "Toxic exposures, not only to Agent Orange, remain our prime concern," noted Rowan. "We are seeking champions in Congress to introduce and enact the **Toxic Wounds Registries Act of 2021**.

Toxic Wounds registries would enable epidemiological research by linking, in Electronic Health Records, a veteran's military history by encoding their location and time of service. VA techs would be able to access the appropriate registry to locate others with whom they served. We call on Congress to ensure this capability is built into the VA's IT system," said Rowan. This legislation would authorize the VA Secretary to enter into an agreement with the National Academy of Medicine to review peer-reviewed scientific research, and it would require those conclusions to inform the Secretary's selection of research to be conducted and/or funded by the VA. It would also establish a presumption of service connection for benefits and healthcare. This legislation would direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a master registry that would incorporate registries for:

- Exposure to Agent Orange during and in the aftermath of the Vietnam War;
- Exposure to toxicants relating to deployment during the 1991 Persian Gulf War;
- Exposure to toxicants from a deployment during Operations Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom and New Dawn, and the Global War on Terror;
- Exposure to toxicants during a deployment to Bosnia, Somalia, or the Philippines; and
- Exposure to toxicants while stationed at a military installation contaminated by toxic substances overseas and/or here in CONUS.

"It is our hope that this legislation will ensure that our most recent veterans will not have to wait 50 years for answers," said Rowan. "We will continue our battle for justice on behalf of all veterans who are suffering ill health effects due to military toxic exposure and for their children and grandchildren--our fellow veterans whose health has

been impacted by their service, for our younger brothers and sisters, the veterans of the Gulf War and those who served Post-911.” [Source: VVA Press Release | March 4, 2021 ++]

Iran Military

Update 02: Ain al-Asad Air Base 2020 & 2021 Attacks



Iran used commercial satellite images to monitor Ain al-Asad Air Base in Iraq as it prepared to launch more than a dozen ballistic missiles at U.S. and coalition forces, 60 Minutes reported. That detail came more than a year after the night of the attack on Jan. 7, 2020. Go to <https://youtu.be/lGP7hZQuTL0> for video of the attack. Iran said the barrage was “fierce revenge” for the assassination of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, killed by the U.S. in a drone strike days earlier. The missile attack damaged the base, equipment and a helicopter, and 110 people had to be treated for traumatic brain injuries. But no one was killed, thanks in part to early intelligence that an attack was imminent and a critical early warning from the Space Force’s missile warning satellite operators.

The 60 Minutes report revealed new details about the timing of the evacuation, and how Iran tried to use commercially available satellite imagery to monitor the base. The report said that Iran purchased satellite images of the base on the day of the attack, and U.S. Central Command was aware of it. According to CBS News national security correspondent David Martin, USCENTCOM Commander Gen. Frank McKenzie timed the evacuation of al-Asad Air Base around Iran’s purchase of satellite imagery of the base. “If you go too early, you risk the problem that the enemy will see what you have done and adjust his plans,” McKenzie told the reporter.

McKenzie waited until Iran had purchased its last satellite image of the day before evacuating the base, ensuring that Iran was acting on out-of-date images, he said in the interview. “They would have seen airplanes on the ground and people working,” said McKenzie. “I think they expected to destroy a number of U.S. aircraft and to kill a number of U.S. service members.” In a statement, USCENTCOM told C4ISRNET that it “does assess that Iran uses commercial satellite imagery from a variety of sources.” It declined to answer further questions. is not clear which satellite imagery provider Iran purchased the images from.

The U.S. intelligence community and the Department of Defense buy commercial satellite imagery for a number of different uses. The National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency purchases unclassified commercial images to share with other government organizations, while the National Reconnaissance

Office is using study contracts to determine what commercial imagery it will purchase for the intelligence community. The military is also showing increased interest in the growing commercial satellite imagery market, signing agreements with various companies for images and real-time analytics. In September, the U.S. Army experimented with using commercial imagery for beyond-line-of-sight targeting. It's also not clear how the U.S. military knew Iran was purchasing the images, or how it knew when images of al-Asad Air Base were purchased.

On 3 MAR 2021 at 7:20 a.m a second attack occurred. A least 10 rockets struck Ain al-Asad air base in Anbar province. The Iraqi military released a statement saying that Wednesday's attack did not cause significant losses and that security forces had found the launch pad used for the rockets — a truck. Video of the site shows a burning truck in a desert area. No one claimed responsibility for the attack, the first since the U.S. struck Iran-aligned militia targets along the Iraq-Syria border last week in response to a spate of rocket attacks that targeted the American presence, including one that killed a coalition contractor from the Philippines outside the Irbil airport.

President Joe Biden told reporters. "Thank God, no one was killed by the rocket, but one individual, a contractor, died of a heart attack. But we're identifying who's responsible and we'll make judgments" about a response. White House press secretary Jen Psaki suggested that the "calculated" U.S. airstrikes last week could be a model for a military response to this attack. Those strikes were in response to an attack on American forces in northern Iraq earlier in February. "If we assess further response is warranted, we will take action again in a manner and time of our choosing," Psaki said.

Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said the U.S. contractor "suffered a cardiac episode while sheltering" from the attack and died shortly afterward. He said there were no service members injured and all are accounted for. British and Danish troops also are among those stationed at the base. The U.S. airstrikes last week, which killed one member of the Iran-aligned militia, had stoked fears of another cycle of tit-for-tat attacks as happened more than a year ago and set off months of increased troop levels in the region. Wednesday's death of the contractor heightens worries that the U.S. could be drawn into another period of escalating attacks, complicating the Biden administration's desire to open talks with Iran over the 2015 nuclear deal.

Frequent rocket attacks in Baghdad targeting the heavily fortified Green Zone, which houses the U.S. Embassy, during Donald Trump's presidency frustrated the administration, leading to threats of embassy closure and escalatory strikes. Those attacks have increased again in recent weeks, since President Joe Biden took office, following a lull during the transition period. [Source: C4ISRNET & Associated Press | Nathan Strout, Samya Kullab, Lolita Baldor, and Howard Altman | March 1 & 3, 2021 ++]

Commissary Shortages

Update 01: New Restrictions Threatened Some U.S. Food Shipments in Europe

After concerns were raised about possible shortages on commissary shelves because of new enforcement of import restrictions in Europe, U.S. and European Union officials reached an agreement to allow 451 shipping containers of products to move to commissaries in Europe, commissary officials announced this week. The EU officials agreed to allow the 451 shipping containers of products to flow to U.S. bases in

Europe. Those containers hold about 1 million cases of items ranging from baby formula and baby food to pet food and canned meats. It's unclear what happens to the pipeline after mid-June, but negotiations continue.

"It's important to stress that at this time there has been no effect on product being sent from the U.S. to Europe," said Bill Moore, director and CEO of the Defense Commissary Agency, in a press release. "We will continue monitoring shipments to Europe and work with our military resale partners and industry suppliers to ensure our customers in Europe are supported." Newly enforced restrictions imposed by the European Union in late February threatened to stop 451 shipping containers of dry food products in various stages of transit to the U.S. bases. Until then, there had been unwritten, verbal exemptions to these restrictions given to the U.S. military, since 2007. During the first week in March, negotiators with the U.S. Department of Agriculture held "multiple meetings" with the Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority, and the Dutch agreed to allow those 451 shipping containers to flow to commissaries, commissary officials said.

The restrictions, which apply to any dry food products that have ingredients derived from an animal, affect about 1,800 individual "shelf stable" stock items sold in the commissaries in Europe. The EU restrictions would require each of these items to have a health certificate. Not all shelf stable products are affected, because not all products have animal ingredients. Products affected ranged from baby formula and baby food to canned meats, canned fish, soups with meat, powdered milk, canned milk, pet food, dried meat and jerky, canned pasta with meat, meat sauces and honey. The new restrictions don't affect U.S. shipments of frozen and chilled items, and the fresh beef and pork products, because these items already have health certificates issued by U.S. government inspectors. But the restrictions applying to dry food products with any animal-derived ingredient mean that suppliers have to go back and document the origin of the animal. For example, if there is a seafood component in the dry food product, the supplier has to document the waters that the fish swam in and the fishing boat that caught the fish. The origin of the milk in baby formula must be documented.

The agreement to allow the 451 containers through takes DeCA into the mid-June time frame for these products, said Chris Burns, executive director for DeCA's sales, marketing and logistics group, in the announcement. "Going forward, we are hopeful that all required health certificates are secured for any container that follows the 451 in route." It takes nearly two months from the time a product is ordered, until it gets to a commissary central distribution center in Europe, traveling by sea. The 451 containers are at various stages in the approximately 55-day order-to-delivery cycle. And as part of their normal operations, commissary distribution centers in Europe maintain a 30- to 45 day supply of dry goods items. "As such, we'll have enough stock to support our customers in Europe through at least mid-June," said commissary spokesman Kevin Robinson.

As negotiations continue between U.S. and European Union officials, questions remain. If commissary officials in the end have to follow the restrictions, it's too early to tell whether it would cause an increase in prices, members of industry told Military Times. And it's unclear how long it would take to get the documentation for the individual health certificates, because products are provided from many different vendors. So it's unclear when or if the new restrictions would affect the supply chain, and thus, the supply of products on the shelves. U.S. officials are negotiating with European Union officials on current and future EU requirements. The Foreign Agricultural Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture has held multiple meetings with the Dutch during the past week, and the Netherlands Food and Consumer Produc

Safety Authority officials have agreed to allow the 451 containers destined for Rotterdam to flow as they normally have in the past, Robinson said.

Along with this high-level effort, the commissary agency's distributor is working with suppliers to obtain the required health certificates for the containers that flow after the 451, Robinson said. "We'll do whatever it takes to ensure the supply chain doesn't get interrupted," said Sharon Fleener, director of export operations and quality assurance for SpartanNash, a leading distributor of products to commissaries in the U.S. and overseas. She said many suppliers in the industry have reached out to her, asking how they can help. "They're just really trying to get the information to me, because they know it's going to be a challenge getting that information" for the health certificates. Fleener said she is confident that there will be some kind of resolution of the issue. "I really want any patron to know we're all in a fight for it, that this gets taken care of as soon as possible."

Industry representatives question the new restrictions, given the rigorous inspection processes already in place in the U.S. "We have very stringent inspection mechanisms in the U.S. This pipeline is a closed pipeline to American mouths. The rationale escapes me. Why now do we have to comply with European rules when this stuff is not going to European consumers?" said Steve Rossetti, president of the American Logistics Association, which represents suppliers of products to commissaries and exchanges. He contends the health certificates shouldn't be required. "This is uncharted territory. We need to fully understand the costs, repercussions and implications for American consumers in Europe," Rossetti said.

For 40 years, Congress has provided taxpayer funding to transport American products overseas to commissaries and exchanges for service members and families, he said, "because of the belief that American families are entitled to recognizable American products in foreign countries." The taxpayer funding, which was about \$91 million in fiscal 2021 for all the overseas transportation costs for commissaries, pays for the cost of getting products to commissaries so that overseas service members and their families' costs for food is similar to the prices in military commissaries in the continental U.S. "Recognizable American products are considered safe by American families because they go through stringent FDA and USDA controls," Rossetti said. "So the mom in Germany wants to see American products because she knows they're safe and reliable." [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Towers | Marcg 12, 2021 ++]

DoD Fraud, Waste, & Abuse

Reported 01 thru 15 MAR 2021

Afghanistan -- The United States wasted billions of dollars in war-torn Afghanistan on buildings and vehicles that were either abandoned or destroyed, according to a report released 1 MAR by a U.S. government watchdog. The agency said it reviewed \$7.8 billion spent since 2008 on buildings and vehicles. Only \$343.2 million worth of buildings and vehicles "were maintained in good condition," said the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, or SIGAR, which oversees American taxpayer money spent on the protracted conflict.

The report said that just \$1.2 billion of the \$7.8 billion went to pay for buildings and vehicles that were used as intended. "The fact that so many capital assets wound up not used, deteriorated or abandoned

should have been a major cause of concern for the agencies financing these projects,” John F. Sopko, the special inspector general, said in his report. Analyst Bill Roggio of the Long War Journal said the findings by SIGAR are not surprising. The reasons for the financial losses include Taliban attacks, corruption and “throwing money at the problem without considering the implications,” he said.

“It is one thing to build a clinic and school, it is another to operate, maintain, and in many cases defend this infrastructure from Taliban attacks,” said Roggio. “Additionally, the West has wildly underestimated the impact of Afghan corruption and in many cases incompetence. It was always a recipe for failure.” U.S. agencies responsible for construction didn’t even ask the Afghans if they wanted or needed the buildings they ordered built, or if they had the technical ability to keep them running, Sopko said in his report. The waste occurred in violation of “multiple laws stating that U.S. agencies should not construct or procure capital assets until they can show that the benefiting country has the financial and technical resources and capability to use and maintain those assets effectively,” he said.

Torek Farhadi, a former adviser to the Afghan government, said a “donor-knows-best” mentality often prevailed and it routinely meant little to no consultation with the Afghan government on projects. He said a lack of coordination among the many international donors aided the wastefulness. For example, he said schools were on occasion built alongside other newly constructed schools financed by other donors. The construction went ahead because once the decision was made — contract awarded and money allocated — the school was built regardless of the need, said Farhadi. The injection of billions of dollars, largely unmonitored, fueled runaway corruption among both Afghans and international contractors. But experts say that despite the waste, the need for assistance is real, given the Afghan governments heavy dependence on international money.

The worsening security situation in Afghanistan also greatly impeded the monitoring of projects, with shoddy construction going undetected, said Farhadi, the former Afghan government adviser. “Consult with the locals about their needs and sustainability of the project once the project is complete,” he urged U.S. funding agencies looking to future projects. “Supervise, supervise, supervise project progress and implementation and audit every single layer of expenditure.”

Going forward, Roggio said smaller, more manageable projects should be the order of the day. To build big unmanageable projects that Afghanistan has neither the capacity nor technical expertise for after 40 years of relentless war “feeds into the Taliban narrative that the government is corrupt, incompetent, and incapable of providing for the Afghan people,” he said. [Source: The Associated Press | Kathy Gannon | March 1, 2021 ++]

MidEast Troop Levels

Fight to Make the Pentagon Share Numbers

While ending the “forever wars” in Iraq and Afghanistan was a cornerstone of the Trump administration’s foreign policy, it became increasingly difficult during his presidency for the public to get numbers of troops on the ground in those countries, as well as Syria. That was part of a concerted policy effort, according to documents obtained by the online forum Just Security. A Freedom of Information Act request-turned-lawsuit, the results of which went online 4 MAR, gives some insight into Middle East troop

levels during the last four years, though the Pentagon is still considering its “temporary forces” — thousands on rotational deployments to fight ISIS or train local partners — classified.

“DoD’s new assertion that these numbers are classified reflects what many have described as a culture of secrecy that has descended upon today’s national security bureaucracy,” according to the authors of Just Security’s report. Previously, statistics on presence in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria had been shared publicly in quarterly manpower reports. A change to the way those levels were counted, in 2017 under Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, ended those reports in late 2017. Documents obtained through a 2020 FOIA request, which were denied until Just Security sued the Defense Department in October, show that troop levels stood at about 12,000 in Afghanistan, 7,600 in Iraq and 1,200 in Syria in June 2017, increasing across the board into 2018 before beginning to come down in mid-2019. Those 2017 numbers were consistent with what DoD provided in response to individual requests, despite discontinuing its quarterly online reports.

At the time the Pentagon reluctantly offered 14,000 as the number in Afghanistan, after a small surge early on in the Trump presidency, and rounded up the Syria numbers from 1,700 to 2,000, where special operations and support personnel waged a battle against ISIS, alongside local Kurdish partners. Lawsuit documents show the number held at 1,700 from late 2017 until a reduction to approximately 1,000 in mid-2019. An abrupt Trump threat with withdrawal all of those troops, in late 2018 prompted Mattis to tender his resignation. Because the numbers provided piecemeal to reporters were more or less the same as those the Pentagon kept internally, it begs the question of why DoD discontinued the online reports at all, especially after laws were put in place to require public reporting.

The lack of transparency caught Congress’s eye, inspiring a section of the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act requiring a report to lawmakers on troop levels, with which DoD complied. The following year, the NDAA attempted to reinstate the public, quarterly reports, but as Just Security noted, did not include an enforcement mechanism — and so the Pentagon flouted it, continuing to call those troop levels classified. Documents explaining that reasoning do exist, and were provided to Just Security, though they are redacted to the point that the explanations are obscured. Technically, the Pentagon argued during the FOIA process, its reports to Congress contain classified information, and thus are exempt from public disclosure. But the NDAA-required quarterly reports are not meant for Congress specifically, Just Security argues, and so should not be exempt.

After Mattis’s resignation, that policy continued as is still in place, per a February letter in response to the lawsuit, despite the new administration putting an emphasis on open communication with the public. “I believe that public transparency regarding military operations and the civilian leadership’s decision making on defense matters is critical to ensuring our defense policies are accountable to the American people,” Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told lawmakers during his January confirmation hearing. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Meghann Myers | March 4, 2021 ++]

POW/MIA Recoveries & Burials

Reported 01 thru 15 MAR 2021 | Five

“Keeping the Promise“, “Fulfill their Trust” and “No one left behind” are several of many mottos that refer to the efforts of the Department of Defense to recover those who became missing while serving our nation.

The number of Americans who remain missing from conflicts in this century as of FEB 2019 are: World War II 73,025 of which over 41,000 are presumed to be lost at sea, Korean War 7665, Vietnam War 1589 (i. e. VN-1,246, Laos-288, Cambodia-48, & Peoples Republic of China territorial waters-7), Cold War 111, Iraq and other conflicts 5. Over 600 Defense Department men and women -- both military and civilian -- work in organizations around the world as part of DoD's personnel recovery and personnel accounting communities. They are all dedicated to the single mission of finding and bringing our missing personnel home.

For a listing of all missing or unaccounted for personnel to date refer to <http://www.dpaa.mil> and click on 'Our Missing'. Refer to <https://www.dpaa.mil/News-Stories/Recent-News-Stories> for a listing and details of the 141 accounted for in 2005. If you wish to provide information about an American missing in action from any conflict or have an inquiry about MIAs, contact:

== Mail: Public Affairs Office, 2300 Defense Pentagon, Washington, D. C. 20301-2300, Attn: External Affairs Call: Phone: (703) 699-1420

== Message: Fill out form on <http://www.dpaa.mil/Contact/ContactUs.aspx>



Family members seeking more information about missing loved ones may also call the following Service Casualty Offices: U. S. Air Force (800) 531-5501, U. S. Army (800) 892-2490, U. S. Marine Corps (800) 847-1597, U. S. Navy (800) 443-9298, or U. S. Department of State (202) 647-5470. The names, photos, and details of the below listed MIA/POW's which have been recovered, identified, and/or scheduled for burial since the publication of the last RAO Bulletin are listed on the following sites:

- <https://www.vfw.org/actioncorpsweekly>
- <http://www.dpaa.mil/News-Stories/News-Releases>
- <http://www.thepatriotspage.com/Recovered.htm>
- <http://www.pow-miafamilies.org>
- <https://www.pownetwork.org/bios/b/b012.htm>
- <http://www.vvmf.org/Wall-of-Faces>

LOOK FOR

-- **Army Pfc. Juan F. Gutierrez**, 26, was a member of 200th Coast Artillery Regiment, when Japanese forces invaded the Philippine Islands in December 1941. Intense fighting continued until the surrender of the Bataan peninsula on April 9, 1942, and of Corregidor Island on May 6, 1942. Interment Services are pending. [Read about Gutierrez.](#)

-- **Army Master Sgt. James Hart, Jr.**, 25, of Hopkins, Texas, was a member of Company C, 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division. He was reported missing in action on Dec. 2, 1950, when his unit was attacked by enemy forces near the Chosin Reservoir, North Korea. Following the battle, his remains could not be recovered. Hart will be buried June 8, 2021, in Winterfield, Texas. [Read about Hart.](#)

-- **Army Cpl. Ralph S. Boughman**, 21, of Union, South Carolina, was a member of Company B, 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division. He was reported missing in action on Dec. 2, 1950, when his unit was attacked by enemy forces near the Chosin Reservoir, North Korea. Following the battle, his remains could not be recovered. Boughman will be buried May 15, 2021, in his hometown. [Read about Boughman.](#)

-- **Army Cpl. David B. Milano**, 17, of Chicago, was a member of Company D, 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division. He was reported missing in action on Dec. 2, 1950, when his unit was attacked by enemy forces near the Chosin Reservoir, North Korea. Following the battle, his remains could not be recovered. Milano will be buried in Ogden, Utah. The date has yet to be determined. [Read about Milano.](#)

-- **Marine Corps Reserve Pfc. J.L. Hancock**, 21, was a member of Company B, 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force, which landed against stiff Japanese resistance on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll of the Gilbert Islands, in an attempt to secure the island in November 1943. Over several days of intense fighting at Tarawa, approximately 1,000 Marines and sailors were killed and more than 2,000 were wounded, while the Japanese were virtually annihilated. Interment Services are pending. [Read about Hancock.](#)

[Source: <http://www.dpaa.mil> | March 2021 ++]

* VA *



VA Survivors

Update 02: Survivors and Burial Benefits Kit Access

After the passing of a loved one who has served this country, many survivors do not know what to do or where to begin to obtain VA assistance. VA has prepared a Survivors and Burial Benefits kit to help guide Veterans, service members and their families after the loss of a loved one. The Kit gives a description of each burial benefit, instructions on how to apply, and where to go to get assistance. It covers:

- Pre-need eligibility for National Cemetery burial or memorialization
- Memorial or burial flags
- Government headstones or markers
- Medallions
- Presidential Memorial Certificates (PMC)
- Burial benefits and burial automatic payments
- Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC)
- Dependents' Educational Assistance Program (DEA)
- Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship
- Survivors pension

- Special monthly pension benefits
- The Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMP-VA)
- Home loan guaranty
- Veterans Month of Death benefits
- VA life insurance

Other features include tips on how to fill out applications with examples of completed forms. These tips examples give applicants a better understanding of how to properly fill out applications. VA encourages Veterans and service members to discuss their military service with their dependents, as well as planning their legacy. Families and survivors should know where to locate service medical records, discharge documents, VA disability ratings, and other information. These details will be beneficial to survivors as they prepare to apply for VA benefits. Families and survivors should keep this kit in storage so that it will be available when needed. **The Planning Your Legacy VA Survivors and Burial Benefits Kit** is available for download at <https://www.benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/docs/VASurvivorsKit.pdf>. [Source: Vantage Point Blog Update | March 2, 2021 ++]

VA Appointments

Update 23: Next Medical Challenge: Catching Up on Millions of Missed Ones

Veterans Affairs officials still have millions of coronavirus vaccines to distribute in coming months, but they are already warily eyeing the next massive medical challenge to follow: making up millions of medical appointments for veterans who have put off routine and specialty care because of virus concerns. “We’ve had massive amounts of health care deferred,” said acting VA Under Secretary for Health Richard Stone in an interview with Military Times on 3 MAR. “We’re down almost 12,000 surgeries a month from before the pandemic. And have to be able to look after those who need us when they come back.”

Federal medical experts have estimated that as many as 41 percent of Americans have deferred regular check-ups or non-emergency care visits since last spring, when public officials ordered business closures and stay-at-home orders in an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19. VA officials said that they have made up some of those lost appointments through telehealth. In a roundtable with reporters this week, VA Secretary Denis McDonough said that the number of online appointments has increased almost 20-fold in the last year, from 2,500 a day last March to 45,000 a day this month. “But we’re still looking at delayed or deferred care of more than 19 million appointments,” he said. “And some of that delayed care is going to be more costly than it has been in the past.”

Department leaders are highlighting those new expenses as part of their campaign for President Joe Biden’s coronavirus relief package, under debate on Capitol Hill. The \$1.9 trillion plan includes about \$15 billion in new VA spending, money that some conservatives have argued could be deferred until next fiscal year, and considered in the normal budgeting process. Secretary McDonough dismissed that assessment. “I wish we had the ability to just let this be an issue out over the horizon,” he said. “But with telehealth, we need additional information technology investments now to respond to the demand, including more hardware and software for vets. And we don’t know exactly when all those other [in-person] appointments will come back.”

Stone said medical officials are already preparing for the flood of rescheduled appointments. At the height of the pandemic, about 6,000 workers a day were unable to work because of contract tracing or personal illness. That number is down to around 1,000 a day now, effectively giving VA an influx of extra workers to handle rising patient demands. He said that as veterans receive vaccines, they are also being informed of services that have reopened (to make up for missed medical appointments) and of other resources available to them. That's particularly important for individuals who may be facing new mental health issues from the stress and isolation of the pandemic. "This isn't something that will just be over," he said. "We recognize that we're going to be dealing with the effects of this pandemic probably for the next few years."

The vaccine effort shouldn't take nearly as long. In the first few weeks of vaccine distribution, VA was administering about 104,000 doses a week. Now they're up to about 194,000 each week, Stone said, with the capability of going even higher. "When vaccines are available from our federal partners, we're at the front of the line asking for more," he said. "They're seeing that we can get it into people's arms quickly, so that has helped us get more." Nearly 10,600 VA patients have died from coronavirus complications in the last year. Nationwide, nearly 520,000 Americans have died from medical issues linked to the virus. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | March 3, 2021 ++]

VA Physical Therapy

Update 01: Program Reduces Chronic Pain for Older Veterans



A group physical therapy program by VA Geriatric Scholar Ralph Magnuson and colleagues from the Redding VA Clinic in Northern California combines exercises with instruction on the neuroscience of pain to help older Veterans increase mobility, reduce chronic pain, and improve quality of life. **Pain neuroscience education** (PNE) is a way of understanding the brain's role in producing pain with the aim to decrease the severity of how patients perceive chronic pain. Traditionally, physical therapy falls into a biomedical model of care, explained Dr. Magnuson. "We assess that shoulder or back and try to identify the pain generator. When we find it, we try to fix it. Therapeutic neuroscience is more on the biopsychosocial model where we focus on the whole person."

At the start of the program, Magnuson asked participants about their pain management goals. "We're moving towards patient-focused goals versus the primary care physician or therapist-driven goals." Veterans told him, "I just want to walk with my grandkids," or "I want to be able to go out to dinner with my wife and shop in the community," and "I want to know if there's anything else I could possibly do." Physical therapy helps older Veterans increase mobility, reduce chronic pain and improve quality of life.

Engaging patients in their own care

Before and after the program, participants were assessed for the presence of chronic pain and its intensity to test the effectiveness of physical therapy combined with PNE. Average pain scores improved for all participants by more than 20%. “We saw a significant change as a group. When they worked together, with camaraderie that was exercise-based, they just in general felt better,” Magnuson explained. “They were observed moving better. I think that relates to, if I feel better, and I move better, my pain must be better.” Magnuson encourages Veterans to commit to exercise after the program to maintain improvements. Though COVID-19 physical distancing measures at the Redding VA Clinic gym have temporarily halted group physical therapy, he helps patients stay active using [VA Video Connect](#). He also delivers virtual therapy to rural Veterans in Yreka, Mount Shasta, and Burney.

When patients with chronic pain need advanced care, Magnuson uses telehealth to connect patients with Kathryn Schopmeyer, Physical Therapy Program coordinator for Pain Management at [San Francisco VA Medical Center](#). Schopmeyer is a nationally recognized PNE specialist who collaborates with physical therapists throughout VA Northern California Health Care System. “The three of us work together. I’m a local resource for that patient instead of them having to drive to San Francisco,” she said. Magnuson’s program was inspired by and developed as part of his engagement in the VA Geriatric Scholars Program Quality Improvement Workshop and Practicum.

The Geriatric Scholars Program is a national workforce development program that trains primary care providers in geriatric medicine and teaches fundamental skills in quality improvement based on the IHI Model for Improvement and PDSA Cycle. Magnuson’s experience with the [VA Geriatric Scholars Program](#) led to another quality improvement opportunity. He joined the coaching program within VA known as VA Transformational Coaching Network. “It’s a way to give back. We’re paying it forward and helping somebody else get to the end result like I did.” [Source: Vantage Point | March 2, 2021 ++]

VA Claims Assistance

Update 10: Vets Cautioned on Predatory Assistance Reps

During National Consumer Protection Week, Feb. 28-March 6, the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) is raising public awareness about a tool to protect Veterans and claimants from companies who may be targeting them or their potential benefits. VA encourages Veterans and their families filing benefits claims to review the department’s [Accreditation Search Index](#). The index provides state-by-state contact information, as well as a downloadable list of Veterans Service Organization (VSO) representatives, attorneys and claims agents who are ready to assist with preparing VA claims in an ethical and lawful manner.

“VA cautions Veterans and claimants of online offers to assist in the preparation of their benefit claims that sound too good to be true,” said Acting Under Secretary for Benefits Thomas Murphy. “To help guard against fraud and scams, VA urges all Veterans and claimants to first consult VA’s Accreditation Search Index to protect themselves from predatory practices.”

A business or individual who prepares, presents or prosecutes VA benefit claims without proper recognition by the department is doing so contrary to law. All accredited representatives have been formally

vetted to ensure they have good character and reputation along with being capable of providing competent representation for presenting to VA. When assisting Veterans, they must adhere to VA's standards of professional conduct which expressly prohibit the charging of unlawful or unreasonable fees. Those found in violation risk having their VA accreditation suspended or cancelled.

For more information on VA accredited representatives and their role, visit [Accreditation & Discipline - Office of General Counsel](#) to find information on VA-recognized VSOs and VA-accredited VSO representatives, attorneys and claims agents, fees for services and guidance on how to appoint and how to remove or change representation. [Source: VA News Releases | March 4, 2021 ++]

VA Websites

Update 07: DoJ Asked by VA to Help Reclaim 'GIBill.com'

The Department of Veterans Affairs is asking the Department of Justice to step in after it lost control of the domain "GIBill.com," a site that has previously been used by scammers. "As the owner of the registered trademark 'GI Bill,' VA has referred the matter to the Department of Justice to reclaim the GIBill.com domain in accordance with the Uniform Domain Name Dispute Resolution Policy," Joe Williams, a spokesman for the agency, said Wednesday.

Advertisement

The VA seemingly lost the domain rights to GIBill.com last year, drawing frustration from some lawmakers and veteran advocates. Now, some advocates are urging President Joe Biden's administration to reacquire the domain to protect beneficiaries from scammers and deceptive marketers. Veterans Education Success, a nonpartisan veteran advocacy group, sent a letter to Biden last week urging him to take steps to expand GI Bill protections, including reclaiming the lost domain GIBill.com, which has in the past been used by the for-profit education industry to deceive veterans.

The VA appeared to own the website at least as of 20 MAY last year, according to the Wayback Machine internet archive, which stores website screenshots. The department seems to have lost control of the domain last June. The URL does not currently forward to a website, and the domain is being withheld by an unidentified owner. A decade ago, GIBill.com was owned by QuinStreet, an online marketing firm whose clients included a vast roster of for-profit schools. The firm used the website to masquerade as the VA, directing veterans to for-profit schools and falsely telling beneficiaries that students could get the most out of their education benefits at the schools it advertised.

A coalition of 20 attorneys general -- including then-Delaware AG Beau Biden, the president's late son -- filed a lawsuit to take the URL away from scammers, which led the VA to trademark the term "GI Bill" in 2012. "We're acting to ensure that service members are not deceived by companies who are more interested in adding to their bottom line than in providing clear information to soldiers about the educational benefits they have earned while protecting us," Beau Biden said in a 2012 statement. That year, QuinStreet was forced to terminate the website and pay \$2.5 million in penalties over deceptive advertising practices that targeted student veterans.

Jack Conway, then the attorney general of Kentucky, said at the time that QuinStreet's use of GIBill.com was "the most egregious example" that he had seen of misinformation and greed directed at veterans. He

said the investigation included a review of 8,000 emails to QuinStreet through the site, many of which came from veterans who believed they were communicating with VA officials. The marketing firm regularly redirected visitors to a small group of for-profit schools. Despite the VA holding the trademark, there are concerns the domain could fall into the wrong hands again. "It's very risky to have GIBill.com not owned by VA," said Carrie Wofford, president of Veterans Education Success. "The whole reason that law enforcement shut down GIBill.com in 2012 and forced the private owner to give the domain to VA is because it was wildly abusing and deceiving veterans. That is likely to happen again."

Veterans Education Success, through a domain broker, offered up to \$5,000 to buy the domain to get it out of the wild and return it to the VA, but the anonymous owner turned it down. GIBill.com could be used for other means, which could confuse veterans trying to find information and apply for benefits. However, the VA could potentially file a lawsuit if the domain was ever used to deceive beneficiaries again. "The owner of the domain name cannot use the domain name in a way which would mislead the public to believe that it is owned, sponsored or affiliated with the Department of VA," said Jeffrey Kobulnick of Brutzkus Gubner, an attorney who specializes in intellectual property. "If the domain is used with a problematic website or for deceptive purposes in the future, the VA would potentially file a lawsuit for trademark infringement and cybersquatting and seek to recover the domain name again."

Veterans have long been targets of deceptive and aggressive recruiting from for-profit schools, which are required to earn at least 10% of their revenue outside of Pell Grants or federal student loans. Because of a so-called "90/10 loophole," the GI Bill technically does not count as federal money, despite the scholarship being earned on military duty and delivered by the VA. All domain purchases have an end date. If one lapses and the owner doesn't renew ownership, there are companies that use algorithms to identify unregistered domains to acquire and sell on auction sites.

It is unclear how the VA initially lost the domain. Last year, the department blamed the Obama administration and didn't say it was trying to reacquire the site, despite evidence in Wayback suggesting the department had recently owned it. When the VA secured the domain after the 2012 lawsuit, it used GIBill.com to redirect to the department's official website. All VA websites have ".gov" internet addresses. (Editor's Note: Military.com is a former client of QuinStreet. That relationship ended in 2019) [Source: Military.com | Steve Beynon | February 25, 2021 ++]

VA Heart Care

Update 06: Minority Women at Greater Risk of Heart Disease

Heart disease is the number one cause of death for women in the U.S., yet many women aren't aware of this. Additionally, women from many minority communities are at greater risk for developing heart disease than other women. When it comes to women Veterans, recent studies reveal:

- Black women Veterans have more conditions that can lead to heart disease than other women. These conditions include diabetes, obesity, and high blood pressure.
- Women Veterans with physical disabilities are three times more likely to experience heart disease than all other women Veterans.

- Women Veterans who identify as a sexual minority are nearly twice as likely to experience heart disease as women Veterans who identify as heterosexual.

No one reason explains why minority women are affected more significantly when it comes to heart disease. It's viewed as a result of many factors stacked together. Some contributing factors include heart disease that runs in families, higher levels of daily stress or living in areas where there are fewer healthy food options. No matter what the reason, small changes every day can help reduce up to 80% of heart disease events. VA providers specializing in women's health can give you information about lowering your risk factors and can help you make diet and exercise changes to lower your risks. VA is your partner in achieving your health goals. At your next primary care visit, ask about:

- Nutritionists to help you plan a heart healthy, low-salt, low fat diet.
- Wellness activities like VA's Whole Health Program that incorporate Yoga and Tai Chi.
- Women's only support groups.
- VA's Move! Weight Management Program.
- Smoking cessation programs.

The best way to take control of your heart health is to talk with your provider and make a personal plan to care for yourself at home. Target your main risk factor, whether it's high blood pressure, weight, diabetes or smoking. Start slowly by adding a new physical activity to your routine, eating more fruits and vegetables or cutting back on any tobacco use. Ask your provider for information about programs available at your medical center.

Understanding your risk factors and how to combat them is key to maintaining good heart health and VA is here to support you. More information is available on the [Women Veterans Health Care webpage](#). Or, reach out to the Women Veterans Call Center at (855) 829-6626 or your local VA health center to get support. [Source: Vantage Point | Dr. Chelsea Cosby | February 24, 2021 ++]

Agent Orange & Hypertension

Update 02: Addition to Presumptive Conditions Would Benefit 160K Vets

The leaders of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee urged the Department of Veterans Affairs on 26 FEB to add hypertension to the list of conditions presumed to be caused by Agent Orange — a move that would grant eligibility for VA benefits to about 160,000 veterans. Sens. Jon Tester (D-MT) and Jerry Moran (R-KS) wrote to new VA Secretary Denis McDonough asking him to exercise his authority on the issue. Vietnam War veterans have been waiting years for the VA to recognize a link between hypertension and exposure to chemical herbicides during the war.

“More than fifty years have passed since Vietnam veterans served and sacrificed for this nation, many of whom continue to suffer the damaging effects of their exposure to Agent Orange,” the senators wrote. “There is no time for further delay, our veterans deserve transparent communication and decisive action.” During McDonough’s first news briefing with reporters this week, he said he felt the urgency to act on the issue. He vowed to look at the scientific evidence, rather than the cost. The VA previously estimated that the addition of hypertension to the presumptive list would cost more than \$11 billion over the next 10 years.

“Inevitably, people focus first on cost,” McDonough said. “I want to focus first on the facts and on the data and what we know.”

Researchers with the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine found for the first time in 2018 that “sufficient” evidence exists to link hypertension to Agent Orange exposure. Since then, advocates have pushed the VA to add the condition to the list of presumptive conditions, which would lower the amount of proof veterans must provide in order to receive VA benefits. The VA secretary has the power to add conditions to the presumptive list. After the National Academies released their finding in 2018, former VA Secretary Robert Wilkie said that he wouldn’t make a decision about the condition until the end of 2020, when the results of two more scientific studies on the issue were expected to be published. The VA later said that the coronavirus pandemic had delayed the studies until mid-2021.

Tester and Moran asked McDonough on 266 FEB to determine whether the additional studies were necessary. They also asked that he work with the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee to create fair, transparent process for illness to be added to the list of presumptive conditions in the future. “Veterans deserve an enduring framework, supported by science, that utilizes a fair and transparent process set up to serve them for generations to come,” the senators wrote. “We welcome your collaboration with our committee to establish that framework.”

At the end of last year, Congress passed a measure approving benefits for Vietnam War veterans suffering from bladder cancer, hypothyroidism and Parkinson’s-like symptoms — all conditions linked to Agent Orange exposure. The change affects about 34,000 veterans suffering from the conditions. The measure now falls to McDonough to implement. He said this week he was building a timeline for implementation. “I feel some urgency because it’s statute, and one of the things I committed to was implementing the statutory changes consistent with the intent of Congress,” McDonough said. “We’re continuing to be under the gun on that, and I think that’s a good thing.” [Source: Stars & Stripes | Nikki Wentling | February 26, 2021 ++]

VGLI

Update 07: Premium Reductions Coming to Enrollees

All Veterans insured under Veterans’ Group Life Insurance (VGLI) will receive a reduction in premiums effective April 1, ensuring that VGLI remains a cost effective option for Veterans and transitioning uniform service members who choose Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) insurance products. Premiums for VGLI will be reduced by an average of 7% across all age groups — allowing separating service members to continue their Servicemembers’ Group Life Insurance coverage level as a renewable term insurance policy after leaving service. “The reduction in VGLI premiums will make life insurance even more affordable for Veterans,” said Acting Under Secretary for Benefits Thomas Murphy. “Offering our Veterans better rates for their life insurance as they transition to civilian life is just one effort the department is taking to address the needs of our customers.”

While any separating service member who has SGLI coverage upon separation is eligible to sign up for VGLI after separation, they must submit their application and initial premium within 240 days after leaving the military to apply without proof of good health. Those who apply after the 240-day period but before the

deadline of one year and 120 days from separation will need to submit proof of good health by completing a questionnaire regarding medical conditions. Additionally, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, VA is temporarily extending the application deadlines for VGLI by an additional 90 days beyond the initial 240-day period and the one year and 120 day-period, referenced above, to offer more flexibility to separating service members. This enrollment extension will remain in effect until June 2021. To learn more about VA Insurance, the new VGLI rates, calculating your insurance needs and opening an application refer to https://www.benefits.va.gov/INSURANCE/docs/VGLI_Rates_04-2021.pdf. [Source: VA News Release | March 1, 2021 ++]

VBBP

Update 01: Program Helping Vets Receive Secure Benefit Payments

The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Veterans Benefits Banking Program (VBBP) reached a new milestone with more than 50,000 Veterans having switched to receiving their monetary benefits through direct deposit. VBBP was created in partnership with the Association of Military Banks of America (AMBA) and works with the Defense Credit Union Council (DCUC) to leverage their combined consortium of military-friendly, federally insured financial institutions to help Veterans acquire a secure bank account. Veterans who do not have an account with a financial institution must receive their benefit payments through a paper check or pre-paid debit card, which puts them at an increased risk for fraud and subject to high service fees.

“At any given time, there are more than 175,000 Veterans without a bank or credit union account,” said Acting Under Secretary for Benefits Veterans Benefits Administration Thomas Murphy. “It is VA’s responsibility to ensure Veterans and their families get the benefits they have earned — on time, every time. VBBP is just one way we are working to make that happen.” Since the program’s inception in December 2019, the number of Veterans who rely on paper checks and pre-paid debit cards for their benefits has steadily decreased. While services available will vary among financial institutions, VBBP makes it easier for Veterans to choose a bank or credit union based on how these services align with their individual banking needs. VA, AMBA and DCUC do not endorse any bank or credit union and Veterans are not required to use a VBBP bank or direct deposit to receive their monetary benefits. Learn more about VBBP or find a participating financial institution at <https://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/banking.asp>. [Source: VA News Release | March 3, 2021 ++]

GI Bill Schools

Update 22: Predatory School Legislation Signed

Lawmakers on 10 MAR finalized plans for major changes in for-profit colleges’ ability to recruit and enroll veterans in degree programs, but students are unlikely to see any school restrictions or closings as a result of the move for several more years. That’s because Senate lawmakers added language delaying rule making on the sweeping changes for six months, to allow veterans advocates and for-profit industry officials’ time to adjust practices and minimize disruption for individuals completing their studies. It’s a compromise that

is being praised by both sides of the debate, but it also means the full impact won't be seen until late 2023 at the earliest.

But veterans groups said that doesn't minimize the scope of the changes ahead, or the potential future benefits to weed out predatory schools focused more on enrolling veterans than providing quality education opportunities. "After nearly a decade of requests from veterans and military organizations, we are grateful Congress is moving to finally remove the target from the backs of veterans and servicemembers by closing this loophole," said Carrie Wofford, president of Veterans Education Success (VES). "For too long, bad actor colleges have treated veterans and servicemembers as nothing more than dollar signs in uniform."

At issue is the so-called 90-10 rule, which requires colleges and universities to have at least 10 percent of their revenues derived from non-federal sources like tuition or fundraising. The idea behind the regulation is to ensure that for-profit institutions aren't funded solely by federal dollars, essentially using taxpayer money as their only reliable source of income. However, under a loophole in existing rules, GI Bill benefits and Defense Department Tuition Assistance programs are not counted as federal money. "For decades, the 90-10 loophole incentivized predatory schools to unfairly target student veterans and members of the military," said Jared Lyon, president of Student Veterans of America. Schools with large numbers of students using the GI Bill could plus up their federal money well above the 90 percent mark, increasing their guaranteed funds regardless of student performance. "This legislation will protect recipients of the GI Bill, including military widows and surviving children, from those who would take advantage of their government education benefits to lure them into attending their predatory for profit institutions of higher learning," said Bonnie Carroll, president and founder of the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors.

Plans to close the loophole gained some momentum in Congress last session, but failed to become law before the end of term. So congressional Democrats included language to close that loophole in the earliest versions of their \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief bill. But several Republicans objected to that plan, saying it moved too quickly and risked disrupting veterans' education plans by forcing schools to close too quickly if they weren't in line with the new regulation. Over the weekend, a bipartisan group of lawmakers led by Sen. Tom Carper (D-DE) and Jerry Moran (R-KS) pushed through new language to extend the rule making and compliance portions of the change. House lawmakers finalized that deal when they passed the coronavirus relief package on 10 MAR.

"We need to make sure we do this in the right way, make these changes in the correct way, and we need to ensure we put the policy back in the perspective of not politics but the right answer," said Moran, ranking member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, shortly before the unanimous Senate vote on the issue last weekend. "By providing a six-month delay before the start of a negotiated rulemaking process, Congress now has time to work together with our veteran service organizations and the higher education community on a bipartisan plan to deliver reasonable and needed protections for veterans and taxpayers alike."

That final plan drew praise from for-profit industry representatives. "The Senate [change] will allow time for a fair, rational, and permanent solution for an issue that has been driven by partisan politics for far too long," said Jason Altmire, president of Career Education Colleges and Universities. "We support collaborative and bipartisan solutions to the issues that divide us." After President Joe Biden signed the measure into law 11 MAR work will now begin on the next phase of establishing the new federal funding rules for colleges and universities. Official rule making won't start until October 2021, after extensive talks

between federal officials, lawmakers and outside advocates. Schools won't face any potential penalties until 2024 at the earliest.

VES officials have estimated that at least 37 for-profit schools across the country today would be affected by reclassifying GI Bill money into the federal funding calculations. Many students currently enrolled in those programs could complete their degrees before the new rules are in place. Numerous other schools have changed recruiting practices in recent years in anticipation of a potential change. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | March 10, 2021 ++]

VANEEP

Pays Most Education Costs + Replacement Salary While In School

VA supports your career goals and offer numerous education support programs and scholarships to help you on your way to achieving them. One of these is the *VA National Education for Employees Program* (VANEEP), which covers not only some of your education costs but also pays your replacement salary while you attend school full-time. Isaac N. Womack, a registered nurse with the VA Portland Health Care System, used his VANEEP scholarship to complete nursing school at the University of Portland.

“This generous scholarship enabled me to attend a program that was otherwise out of my financial reach – it paid a majority share of my tuition. It also matched my regular income, allowing me to focus on schoolwork and other professional pursuits rather than spending time at a job,” Womack said. During his time in nursing school, Womack helped create and manage Oregon Health & Science University’s 3D Printing Prosthetics Lab, which brings prosthetic devices to underserved families across the U.S. He also helped start an internship program, giving college students from across the U.S. and Canada the chance to spend a summer at the lab, design a solution for a patient, and personally deliver it to the patient. The VANEEP scholarship also freed Womack to focus exclusively on his studies, leading to a senior clinical capstone at Portland VA Medical Center and ultimately a job offer there.

“That extra time that I had to study allowed me to get the most out of my educational experience,” Womack said. “I am proud to be a part of this team and help bring the highest quality of care to Veterans.” VANEEP scholarship Part and full-time VA employees who are enrolled in school can receive a full salary and additional tax-free funds toward the cost of higher education, including tuition, registration fees and books. The program is designed to accelerate completion of a degree in an approved academic program for Title 38 or hybrid Title 38 occupations, including:

- Physicians.
- Dentists.
- Chiropractors.
- Podiatrists.
- Optometrists.
- Registered and licensed practical nurses.
- Physician’s assistants.
- Respiratory, physical and occupational therapists.
- Pharmacists.

Recipients have up to three years to complete their education and must agree to serve three years in a VA career for which they trained after program completion or licensure. The maximum funding is \$41,160.42 for the equivalent of three years of full-time coursework, up to 90 credit hours for undergraduate coursework or 54 for graduate-level coursework. If you're looking for an employer that supports your desire to learn and grow, look no further than VA. They are here to help you move into the next phase of your career.

- READ more about the [VANEED program](#).
- EXPLORE our other [education support benefits](#).
- SEARCH for an [open position](#) near you.

[Source: Vantage Point | March 13, 2021 ++]

VA Fraud, Waste & Abuse **Reported 01 thru 15 MAR 2021**

San Antonio, TX — Two Texas construction company owners have pleaded guilty in a long-running scheme to defraud the United States. **Michael Wibracht** of San Antonio, Texas, the former owner of several companies in the construction industry, conspired to defraud the United States in order to obtain valuable government contracts under programs administered by the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) for which neither his nor his co-conspirators' companies were eligible. One co-conspirator, **Ruben Villarreal**, also of San Antonio, pleaded guilty on Nov. 20, 2020, to participating in the same conspiracy.

According to court documents filed in the Western District of Texas in San Antonio, Wibracht, Villarreal, and other co-conspirators conspired to defraud the United States by interfering with the function of the SBA and fraudulently obtaining money from agencies of the United States as early as 2004 continuing at least through 2017. As part of this scheme, the conspirators installed Villarreal, a service-disabled veteran, as the ostensible owner of a general construction company held out as a Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business (SDVOSB). Wibracht and other co-conspirators, however, exercised disqualifying financial and operational control over the construction company. The conspirators concealed that control in order to secure over \$250 million in government contracts that were "set aside" for SDVOSBs in order to benefit their larger, non-qualifying businesses. The SBA administers the SDVOSB program, which is designed to increase the number of government contracts awarded to small businesses owned and controlled by service-disabled veterans. To qualify as an SDVOSB, a company, among other things, must be owned and controlled by a service-disabled veteran.

"Conspiring to fraudulently gain access to federal contracts set aside for small businesses owned and operated by disadvantaged individuals or service-disabled veterans is unacceptable," said Inspector General Hannibal "Mike" Ware. "The guilty pleas send a strong message that those responsible will be held accountable. "The defendants conspired to fraudulently obtain multi-million dollar government contracts under a program designed to benefit service-disabled veterans," said Inspector General Michael J. Missal of the Department of Veterans Affairs. "These guilty pleas send a clear message that individuals and companies who defraud the government contracting process for service-disabled veterans will be held accountable.

Wibracht pleaded guilty to one count of conspiring to commit wire fraud and defraud the United States. Villarreal pleaded guilty to conspiracy to defraud the United States and is scheduled to be sentenced before Judge Xavier Rodriguez on June 23, 2021. Both men face a maximum penalty of five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. The maximum fine for an individual may be increased to twice the gain derived from the crime, or twice the loss suffered by victims of the crime, if either of those amounts is greater than the statutory maximum fine. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors. [Source: DoJ | Justice News | March 5, 2021 ++]

-o-o-O-o-o-

Boston, Mass. — A Stoughton man **Matthew Pizarro**, 32, was sentenced 9 MAR in federal court in Boston by U.S. Senior District Court Judge Rya W. Zobel to 10 years in prison and eight years of supervised release for distributing fentanyl (an opioid used as a pain medication) and crack cocaine. In November 2019, Pizarro pleaded guilty to two counts of distribution of fentanyl, one count of distribution of 40 grams or more of fentanyl and one count of possession with intent to distribute 28 grams or more of crack cocaine. Pizarro was indicted in October 2018 and has been in custody since his arrest in August 2018. In July 2018, agents began an investigation into an overdose death, and learned that the victim obtained fentanyl from a friend, who had purchased the fentanyl from Pizarro. As part of the investigation, over the course of the next month, Pizarro sold approximately 100 grams of fentanyl to an undercover agent. On Aug. 7, 2018, Pizarro was arrested. A search of his residence resulted in the seizure of approximately 45 grams of crack cocaine, 20 grams of powder cocaine and a .25 caliber handgun and ammunition. [Source: DoJ District of Mass | U.S. Attorney's Office | March 10, 2021 ++]

-o-o-O-o-o-

NEWARK, N.J. – A former pharmacy technician was arrested 10 MAR for stealing prescription HIV medications from the pharmacy of the Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) in East Orange, New Jersey. **Lisa M. Hoffman**, 48, of Orange, New Jersey, is charged by complaint with theft of medical products, specifically HIV medication. Hoffman is scheduled to make her initial appearance by videoconference before U.S. Magistrate Judge Mark Falk this afternoon.

According to documents filed in this case and statements made in court: Hoffman's responsibilities at the VAMC included ordering the necessary drugs and supplies for the outpatient pharmacy, including determining when to place orders and for what products, as well as regularly maintaining inventory levels of needed drugs and supplies. From at least August 2017 through November 2019, Hoffman used her position to steal prescription HIV medication from the VAMC. She placed large orders for HIV medication, purportedly on behalf of VAMC, and then stole the medication after it was delivered. VAMC surveillance footage captured Hoffman regularly taking dozens of bottles of HIV medications from the shelves of the outpatient pharmacy, placing them in a white mail bin, and then transferring the medications from the mail bin to her bag and exiting with the stolen medication. Hoffman stole approximately \$8.2 million worth of the VAMC's HIV medication.

Once Hoffman had the medication, Hoffman met her associate, **Wagner Checonolasco**, aka "Wanny," 33, of Lyndhurst, New Jersey, often at her residence, so that she could sell the stolen HIV medication to Checonolasco for cash. After obtaining the stolen HIV medication, Checonolasco resold it to others. Checonolasco was previously charged with conspiracy to steal government property. Those charges remain pending. The charge of theft of medical products is punishable by a potential penalty of 20 years in prison, and a fine of \$1 million, or three times the economic loss attributable to the offense. The charges

and allegations contained in the complaints are merely accusations, and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty. [Source: DoJ District of New Jersey| U.S. Attorney's Office | March 10, 2021 ++]

* Vets *



Burn Pit Lawsuits

Update 04: LeRoy Torres v. the Texas Department of Public Safety

The U.S. Supreme Court has signaled that it is considering a case involving a Texas state trooper who claims he lost his job after deploying to Iraq and becoming sick as a result of exposure to burn pits. The high court on 1 MAR invited the federal government to provide an opinion on the case, *LeRoy Torres v. the Texas Department of Public Safety*, indicating that the justices are scrutinizing it. At issue is whether Texas violated the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Act, or USERRA, which prohibits employers from firing or demoting National Guard and Reserve members who must leave their civilian jobs to train or deploy.

In 2007, Army Reserve Capt. LeRoy Torres deployed to Joint Base Balad, a site with a 10-acre, open-air burn pit that Torres and others say belched smoke over work sites and quarters for years. Torres said exposure to the smoke, which contained dioxin and other chemicals, as well as fine particulate matter, caused chronic cognitive issues and constrictive bronchiolitis, a debilitating lung condition characterized by scarring of the lung's smallest airway branches. When Torres returned home, he sought to continue working as a state trooper. But according to the Texas attorney general's office, his respiratory condition prevented him from "serving on the road."

Torres said he requested an administrative position and provided a list of tasks he could still do but instead was encouraged to resign. He says he was told he had to do so in order to apply for disability retirement. The state then rejected his disability retirement application. The Texas attorney general's office has said in court documents that Torres was offered an administrative position but was placed on leave because he had missed too much work as a result of his illness. Torres sued the state, arguing that it was required to make accommodations for his service-connected disability. He sought more than \$1 million in lost wages and retirement pay.

Texas argued that the case should be dismissed because all states have sovereign immunity against private damage suits over a federal law, unless Congress specifically waives its immunity. The state won, with a lower court denying Torres' claim. The Texas Supreme Court had considered hearing the case and ultimately decided not to, setting the stage for a petition to the U.S. Supreme Court. Roughly 800,000 current or former Reserve and National Guard members work in state or local government jobs across the country. Whether others have been fired or pressured to resign as a result of their military service is unknown.

The decision by the justices to ask Acting Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar to provide input signals they are interested in determining the case's national implications, said Counsel of Record Andrew Tutt with the law firm Arnold & Porter in Washington, D.C. "The Court's decision to ask ... shows that the Court recognizes that this case could have important consequences not only for individual service members but for our country's military readiness and the constitutional power of the federal government to wage war successfully," Tutt said. "We are very pleased that the Court has asked the United States to weigh in on this important case that affects the rights of thousands of service members all across the country."

More than 208,000 service members and veterans have enrolled in the Department of Veterans Affairs Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry, an accounting of those who have served in the Middle East since 1990 and have concerns about deployment-related health. Torres and his wife, Rosie, founded Burn Pits 360 in 2011 to advocate for service members whose lives were affected by exposure to air pollution and other toxins in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Rosie Torres said 1 MAR that the couple is thrilled that their case continues, adding that it is "not just about us." "We and thousands of other families have been through so much. This is a law that would protect those who work for state and local governments who have given much to their country," she added. [Source: Military.com | Patricia Kime | March 1, 2021 ++]

Homeless Vets

Update 104: No Veteran Should Be Without a Place to Call Home

Veterans and their families who are homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness are strongly encouraged to contact the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at (877) 4AID-VET (877-424-3838) for assistance. This number may also be used by them to access VA services. If they have access to a computer they can explore www.va.gov/homeless to learn about VA programs for Veterans who are homeless and share that information with others.

If you see or know a person you believe to be a vet at imminent risk of homelessness you can make the call yourself. You will be asked for information about that individual such as their location and a physical description. As noted in the VA video https://youtu.be/8Ngor_HOn5A?list=RDCMUCBvOzPLmbzjtpX-Htstp2vw a trained VA representative team member will then be dispatched to locate the individual, verify they are a veteran, and discuss with them ways the VA can help them obtain stable housing and other ways VA can help them obtain services they may need.

If Veterans do not have access to a phone or the internet, only then are they to visit their closest VA medical center without calling in advance. VA also urges Veterans who are not homeless or at risk of homelessness to contact their VA medical center before visiting for any reason. These steps are necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Each VA facility has created separate areas or zones to isolate Veterans with possible or confirmed COVID-19 from uninfected patients who need other routine and emergent care. VA is also identifying appropriate quarantine options for Veterans who are homeless to receive treatment if they are symptomatic or screen positive for COVID-19 but are not ill enough for hospital-level care.

No Veteran Should Be Without a Place to Call Home. VA is committed to ending homelessness among Veterans. Their focus is threefold:

- Conducting coordinated outreach to proactively seek out Veterans in need of assistance.
- Connecting homeless and at-risk Veterans with housing solutions, health care, community employment services and other required supports.
- Collaborating with federal, state and local agencies; employers; housing providers, faith-based and community nonprofits; and others to expand employment and affordable housing options for Veterans exiting homelessness.

[Source: <https://www.va.gov/homeless> | March 4, 2021 ++]

U.S. Capitol Riot

Update 08: Charged Army Vet Jessica Watkins renounces Oath Keepers



A member of the Oath Keepers militia group charged with plotting with other extremists in the attack on the U.S. Capitol disavowed the anti-government group in a court hearing 26 FEB, telling the judge she is “appalled” by her fellow Oath Keepers and “humiliated” by her arrest. Jessica Watkins, one of nine members and associates of the far-right militia group charged with planning and coordinating with one another in the 6 JAN siege, said she plans to cancel her Oath Keepers membership and has disbanded her local Ohio militia group. Watkins’ remarks came before the judge ordered her to remain behind bars while she awaits trial.

“I did it out of the love of my country but I think it’s time to let all of that go,” the Army veteran who ran an Ohio bar said during the hearing held via videoconference. “I’m not a criminally minded person... I am humiliated that I am even here today,” she added. Judge Amit P. Mehta said Watkins was “not just a foot soldier” but actively involved in the planning and organizing of the attack and is too dangerous to be released. More than 250 people have been charged with federal crimes so far as a result of the 6 JAN insurrection. The case against those affiliated with the Oath Keepers is the largest conspiracy case brought by prosecutors so far in the attack. Watkins’ comments were surprising as defendants rarely, if ever, address the court during routine hearings over things like detention, because everything they say can be used against them by prosecutors.

Watkins, from Champaign County, Ohio, was part of the “stack” formation used by military infantrymen that was seen marching up the Capitol steps wearing tactical gear as the mob descended on the building, authorities say. Prosecutors say she and other Oath Keepers prepared in the weeks leading up to 6 JAN as if they were going to war — recruiting others and training members — with the goal of blocking the certification of President Joe Biden’s victory. Prosecutors said in court documents that Watkins communicated with other extremists during the attack over an encrypted channel on the walkie-talkie app Zello, saying: “We have a good group. We have about 30-40 of us. We are sticking together and sticking to the plan.” Prosecutors say an unknown man said on the channel: “You are executing citizen’s arrest. Arrest this assembly, we have probable cause for acts of treason, election fraud.”

Watkins’ renouncement of the Oath Keepers stands in sharp contrast to a message authorities say she sent after the attack to the leader of the Oath Keepers about a media report that portrayed the Oath Keepers negatively. Prosecutors say Watkins said: “If he has anything negative to say about us OATHKEEPERS, I’ll let you know so we can sue harder. Class action style. Oathkeepers are the shit. They rescued cops, WE saved lives and did all the right things.” Authorities have revealed chilling allegations in the case against the Oath Keepers, like a text message in which one man suggested getting a boat to ferry “heavy weapons” across the Potomac River. Prosecutors say the Oath Keepers also discussed stationing a “quick reaction force” with weapons outside D.C. to assist.

On 26 FEB, the judge pressed prosecutor Ahmed Baset over whether authorities have evidence that the Oath Keepers actually had a “quick reaction force” set up outside the city on 6 JAN. Baset replied “that’s our understanding,” but didn’t provide any more details before the judge brought the attorneys into a private virtual conference room to discuss the matter further. [Source: The Associated Press | Alanna Durkin Richer | February 28, 2021 ++]

U.S. Capitol Riot

Update 09: Marine Vet Caldwell to Remain In Custody Pending Trial



Daniel Ray Caldwell, a former Marine who worked in the semi-conductor industry for Texas Instruments, talked about storming the U.S. Capitol during the riot and was seen on video spraying a chemical irritant at a group of officers at a barricade, according to the FBI. Prosecutors wanted him to remain behind bars until his trial in Washington D.C. On 5 MAR, a federal judge in Plano agreed and ordered him to remain behind bars after hearing testimony this week and last week during a detention hearing. U.S. Magistrate Judge Kimberly Priest Johnson said in her ruling that no conditions of release would “reasonably assure the safety” of the community.

Caldwell, 49, who lives in The Colony, was arrested 010 FEB by FBI agents at Texas Instruments, his place of employment in Richardson, and was subsequently fired, authorities said. His indictment, unsealed on 3 MAR in Washington D.C., charges him with seven counts: civil disorder; assaulting, resisting or impeding certain officers using a dangerous weapon; entering or remaining in a restricted building or grounds with a deadly or dangerous weapon; disorderly and disruptive conduct in a restricted building or grounds with a deadly or dangerous weapon; engaging in physical violence in a restricted building or grounds with a deadly or dangerous weapon; disorderly conduct in a Capitol building; and act of physical violence in the Capitol grounds or buildings.

Several of those are felonies. Caldwell is at least the 13th North Texan known to be charged in connection with the 6 JAN riot. Assistant U.S. Attorney Tracey Batson told the judge during the 22 FEB detention hearing that Caldwell's actions "indicate a lack of respect toward law enforcement" and that "his own words put him inside the Capitol." Federal authorities investigating the death of Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick are looking into the possibility that he could have had some reaction to a chemical irritant that was sprayed at him and other officers by rioters, according to media reports. But investigators have not currently linked Sicknick's death to any such spray, although they have determined that he didn't die from blunt force trauma, the published reports said.

Video of the violent uprising at the Capitol shows several people in the mob using bear spray, mace and other irritants against police officers who were defending the building. Seth Webb, an FBI agent, testified that a YouTube video shows Caldwell spraying an "orange mist" at about 15 Capitol police officers after which bystanders began coughing. A second video showed Caldwell about two hours later, admitting to pepper spraying officers and describing events by saying "after we started storming," Webb said. Caldwell enjoyed taking part in Airsoft military simulation games, a competitive team shooting sport using air guns to fire plastic projectiles, according to an FBI complaint. However, Caldwell brought a real gun to the course multiple times, according to testimony.

Webb said that an employee of a Sanger military simulation game facility said Caldwell had to be told to leave his real gun in his vehicle. Webb said the employee, who knew Caldwell for about three years, said Caldwell was a white supremacist and a "complete whacko." The employee said he would sometimes invite a Black teenager to events and that Caldwell once asked him "why he always brings [expletive]" Black people, but used the "N-word," the agent said during his testimony. On cross examination, Webb said the employee did not know Caldwell's name. Webb said the witness knew Caldwell by his "code name" or "call sign" that players use.

Caldwell's ex-wife, Kambria Ann Caldwell, said during her testimony that he is not a white supremacist and that he was friends with Black and Latino co-workers. She said her ex-husband doesn't use alcohol or drugs and that he receives VA disability services from a traumatic brain injury he sustained in the early 1990s. She said that when Caldwell returned from Washington following the siege he "mentioned that it got out of hand" but never said he breached the Capitol. And she said her ex-husband's 13 rifles and four handguns are no longer in their house. Caldwell drove to Washington for the Donald Trump rally and stayed the night of 5 JAN at a Virginia hotel, according to testimony at the detention hearing. Webb said he believes Caldwell is dangerous because he brought a "propellant" to a protest and used it on police officers.

Caldwell's attorney, John Hunter Smith, noted that his client was not seen inside the Capitol building in any video or still images. Webb said Capitol police have yet to run a facial recognition check using

Caldwell's photo. And Smith said there is no corroborating evidence to indicate Caldwell is a white supremacist. Smith said Caldwell served in the Marines for five and a half years and was honorably discharged. His LinkedIn account says he is an equipment engineering technician who studied electronics in the Marines. Caldwell has worked in the semiconductor industry for over 25 years and has lived with his ex-wife and son in The Colony since 2016, Smith said. The couple divorced years ago but have tried to reconcile, he said. Caldwell has never been convicted of a felony, according to Smith.

His criminal history includes DWI arrests and a 2008 domestic violence arrest following a fight he had with Kambria Caldwell, according to testimony. She suffered injuries during the incident and filed for divorce the next day, also requesting a protective order, according to testimony. Caldwell pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor in connection with the incident, his attorney said. Prosecutors also noted that Caldwell resisted officers during a 2013 drunken driving arrest. He was physically aggressive at the hospital, where his blood was drawn, and also at the jail, forcing officers to shoot him with a Taser, according to the government. [Source: The Dallas Morning News | Kevin Krause | March 5, 2021 ++]

U.S. Capitol Riot

Update 10: Marine Vet John Andries Pleads Not Guilty



The Washington Post reported 10 MAR a man charged in the Capitol riot is a Marine Corps veteran who once worked as a crew chief for the presidential helicopter squadron. **John Daniel Andries**, charged with violent entry and disorderly conduct in the 6 JAN insurrection, joined Marine Helicopter Squadron One in 2006. He worked under Presidents George Bush and Barack Obama, leaving the Marine Corps in 2009, per the Post. The unit supervises presidential travel aircraft, including Marine One, the designation given to the helicopter when carrying the president, according to the Post. The squadron also tests and evaluates helicopters for the service.

The assignment requires top-secret security clearance and a special higher-level designation known as Yankee White for those working close to the president, unnamed officials told the newspaper. Andries' crew chief duties included aircraft maintenance. Andries was charged in the riot after an online tipster recognized him in TV news footage, according to an FBI affidavit obtained by HuffPost last month. He was spotted in a crowd that was "attempting to push past U.S. Capitol Police officers," the affidavit said. Agents said video shows him participating in the siege at various junctures. He has pleaded not guilty.

More than 30 military veterans are among the nearly 300 people charged in the riot. Dozens of Republican elected officials participated in the mob insurrection. [Source: Huffpost | Ron Dicker | March 11, 2021 ++]

Vet Suicide

Update 53: How to Keep Those At-Risk From Firearms

For about 50 percent of veterans who take their own lives, the time between initial consideration of suicide and actual attempt is less than 10 minutes, says Matt Wetenkamp, a former Marine Corps sniper and scout who now serves as veteran suicide prevention coordinator for the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. “We know that most available methods are rarely fatal,” Wetenkamp told members of The American Legion’s Traumatic Brain Injury, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Suicide Prevention Committee in a virtual meeting 3 MAR as part of the organization’s annual Washington Conference. “But one particular method is almost always fatal.” Firearms, he said, cause more fatal suicides than all other methods of attempt combined.

Wetenkamp and retired U.S. Navy SEAL Jimmy Graham, founder of the Able Shepherd training program – both gun owners – shared with the committee steps that can be taken by veterans and family members to help reduce lethal suicide by firearms and possibly even prevent government attempts to restrict second-amendment rights for some veterans. “We, as gun owners, can help prevent suicide,” Graham explained in a video presented to the committee. “Protecting your loved ones involves more than keeping them safe from accident or attack. Suicide is a serious issue.” Graham said that if friends and family members can be on the lookout for signs of suicidality, directly ask the person in question about it, and take steps to secure firearms during high-risk moments, “we can save lives.” Among the recommendations:

- Spend quality, one-on-one time with loved ones and watch for signs of possible suicidality. Signs include talk of wanting to kill oneself, increased use of drugs or alcohol, reckless behavior, self-isolation and extreme mood swings. Graham said suicide risk also rises after a sudden painful personal, financial or job crisis. “They may talk about feeling hopeless or being a burden to others,” Graham said. “Take these warning signs seriously, and take action.”
- Temporary out-of-home firearm storage may save friends or family members who are struggling, Graham said. Gun shops, shooting ranges and law-enforcement facilities may offer such storage, he added. Firearms can also be loaned to relatives who are legally authorized to possess firearms.
- Safe, secure home storage of firearms – such as combination-lock safes – can improve safety by making access to guns more difficult and time-consuming to reach in times of crisis, which often can be fleeting, Graham said. “Any strategy that builds time between someone in a suicidal crisis and a firearm will keep everyone safer.”
- Asking directly if someone is suicidal, regardless how uncomfortable that may be, can also reduce the risk. Contrary to popular belief, Graham said, the direct approach can improve the situation rather than exacerbate it.

- “Reducing suicide within each of our homes is a job for each of us, as responsible gun owners,” Graham explained in the video. “Together, we can protect our families, our friends and our freedom.”

Committee Chairman Ronald F. Conley, a past national commander of The American Legion, made the point that “The American Legion is a strong supporter of the second amendment. We are not here trying to take anyone’s guns away. What we’re trying to do is resolve a problem that is a crisis in this country, of veterans taking their own lives through suicide.” Conley asked Wetenkamp about some state laws or restrictions that seek to limit or deny gun purchase or ownership to veterans diagnosed with PTSD or other conditions.

“As an employee of the State of Colorado, I support all of the laws that are on the books,” he said. “As a lifelong gun owner and veteran and supporter of the second amendment, I view everything I’ve said here today almost as a plea to you – to the firearm community, to the veteran community at large – take this seriously and do what we can to take care of it on our own – if you don’t like people ending up on lists, if you don’t like red-flag laws ... if you don’t like the idea of a parent going to jail because someone accessed their gun. If you don’t like all those ideas, then let’s take care of this on our own as a community. We can take care of each other.”

Wetenkamp said the veteran-to-veteran approach is analogous to standard social practices to reduce drunk driving. “We, as a community – whether community means the veteran community (or) the firearm-owning community – need to figure out what our ‘friends don’t let friends drive drunk’ is for guns and suicide. We all have a duty, a role and a voice that we can share. We can be the voice of reason in this conversation ... and it does make a difference. It’s our duty, I believe. “You hear many – whether it’s within the veteran community, firearm community or law enforcement – the sheepdog analogy, the idea that there are the wolves, there are sheep and there are those who think of themselves as the protectors, as the sheepdogs. Well, that applies to suicide prevention and taking care of our loved ones in our circles, as well.”

The problem, Wetenkamp explained, is not improving during the COVID-19 pandemic. Suicide remains a top 10 cause of death in the United States, with more than five Americans an hour reportedly taking their own lives. Veterans, he added, are especially vulnerable due to their access and understanding of firearms. “This is a unique group. Obviously, veterans have a high degree of familiarity with firearms, much more so than the average non-veteran. At least 50 percent of veterans report owning at least one gun. At least a third report keeping one unlocked and loaded at all times. And we know from the numbers that veterans are more likely than non-veterans to use a firearm in an attempt. And I say this without any negative connotations whatsoever. It’s just the facts on the ground.”

However, Wetenkamp made it clear that there is no correlation between gun ownership and suicide. “Firearm owners are not more suicidal. There (are) no higher rates of suicidal thoughts, behaviors, mental health problems... it’s just that when that person finds themselves in a suicidal crisis, their attempts are more fatal.” Shooting, he said, is “the most lethal and the most common method used in suicide attempts. Ninety percent of attempts with guns are fatal. Five percent of attempts with all other methods are fatal. More people die every year by suicide with a firearm than all other methods combined ... A lot of lives can be saved by temporarily keeping that one method just further than an arm’s reach away, for a few days.”

The TBI, PTSD and Suicide Prevention Committee also received a presentation from Kelley Tubbs, Washington D.C. VA Medical Center transition care and transition program manager, who explained how the COVID-19 pandemic and virtual treatment were affecting at-risk veterans with PTSD. He said the paradigm has accelerated use of video treatment but added, “You really can’t do acupuncture virtually. You have to do that in person.”

When in-person care or visits from outside vendors have been needed, safety protocols like face masks and home sanitizing have been required. Many self-isolating veterans, Tubbs said, “were forced to take a step back” during the pandemic. “I think a lot of reflection went on.” “We’re dealing with a crisis, as far as the pandemic goes,” Conley said. “But this crisis of suicide has been on the books for a number of years. We need to address the issue, as we move on.” [Source: The American Legion | Jeff Stoffer | March 4, 2021 ++]

Iraq War Vets 05

Andy Anderson | Killed by Mortar Fire



Andy D. Anderson was born in March 1982 in Tacoma, Washington. He grew up in Falls Church, Virginia, and attended J.E.B. Stuart High School. He excelled in football and basketball, making both varsity teams in his sophomore year. Anderson graduated from high school in 2001 and attended Shenandoah University in Winchester, Virginia, for a year before joining the Army in November 2002. Anderson attended basic training in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. He then went to Gulfport, Mississippi, for advanced individual training as a carpentry and masonry specialist. He served with B Company, 46th Engineer Battalion, Fort Rucker, Alabama. Anderson’s unit supported initiatives throughout the country. He worked on assignments including building a rappel tower for the University of Southern Florida’s Reserve Officers’ Training Corps program and working with the U.S. Border Patrol in Douglas, Arizona.

In October 2005, Anderson deployed to Iraq with the 46th Engineer Battalion in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. While in Iraq, he renovated housing for coalition and Iraqi security forces. Anderson also trained as a M203 gunner. Two months after he deployed, he promoted to corporal. In the spring of 2006, Anderson returned home on leave and proposed to his high school sweetheart and best friend since middle school. The couple planned to get married when he finished his tour in October of that year.

About a month later, on June 6, 2006, Anderson was building barracks on his base in Ramadi. It was near the end of the workday, when the construction site came under attack by mortar fire. Anderson and another soldier from his unit died during the attack. In a memorial to his brother, Rafael Anderson remembered that last visit home, “That’s where he found his calling... He just reenlisted for four more years. He told us he’d stay for 20. You could just tell looking into his eyes. . . he was real fulfilled.” Anderson earned numerous medals including a Bronze Star and Purple Heart. He was 24 years old when

he died. Anderson is buried at Arlington National Cemetery. We honor his service. [Source: Vantage Point | January 28, 2021 ++]

Vet Unemployment 2021

Update 02: FEB Unchanged at 5.5%

The veterans unemployment rate across the country remained mostly unchanged for the third consecutive month as the nation enters its second year of pandemic with a significantly worse jobs situation than before the arrival of coronavirus in America. The unemployment rate for all veterans in February was 5.5 percent, the same as in January, Bureau of Labor Statistics officials reported 5 MAR. Among veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars era, the figure was 5.9 percent, down slightly from 6.3 percent in January. The figures equate to about 500,000 veterans across the country actively looking for jobs but unable to find stable employment. Only about half of all American veterans are in the U.S. workforce today, with the rest opting out because of age or injuries.

BLS officials said that the national unemployment dropped slightly from January to February, going from 6.3 percent to 6.2 percent. That's the lowest that number has been since March 2020, when closures and quarantines began nationwide in response to the first coronavirus cases appearing in America. Prior to that, monthly veterans unemployment rates had not topped 5 percent since summer 2014, at the end of the last national recession. About 170,000 additional veterans are out of work currently compared to February 2020.

Congressional Democrats have included in their latest coronavirus relief package \$400 million to establish a new rapid retraining program for veterans who lost their jobs in the last year due to pandemic closures and cuts. Although the broader \$1.9 trillion relief package has been opposed by Republican lawmakers, the idea of a retraining program for veterans has been pushed by lawmakers from both parties since last summer. Veterans would be eligible for the new program if they have already exhausted other federal education benefits, but are unable to find reliable employment. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | March 5, 2021 ++]

WWII Vets 251

Virgil Lee Ward | Pearl Harbor Soldier Dies at 102



A 102-year-old Army veteran who handled a flurry of telephone communications on the morning of the Dec. 7, 1941, Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor died at his Texas home 28 FEB. Virgil Lee Ward, a private during the attack, died at his home in Grand Prairie, local Texas media reported 1 MAR. “He passed away here in his bed,” Merry Lux Ward, his wife, told the San Antonio Express-News. He was hospitalized for pneumonia earlier this year and subsequently began hospice care, the newspaper said.

Ward made a career of the Army, seeing combat during the Korean War and a stint in Vietnam before retiring as a major in 1965. He was among a dwindling number of living veterans who had witnessed the 1941 attack, which took the lives of 2,335 sailors, Marines and soldiers and destroyed or damaged many ships moored in Pearl Harbor. Attacks took place across the island of Oahu.

On the morning of the attack, Ward had been set to deliver copies of the Honolulu Advertiser, a side job he held down for some extra cash, according to an Express-News obituary. But the stack of papers he was to deliver arrived late at the post exchange near Diamond Head, a volcanic ridge on the edge of Honolulu, where his duty station was located. A member of the Signal Corps, Ward’s job was working the Army’s network of telephones. Just before 8 a.m., while still waiting for the newspapers, Ward saw the first Japanese fighters in the sky. “They were flying in a formation when they first came in, and then they split up, of course, and they were diving in the air where I was at, and I was pretty close,” he told Express-News in 2018. Ward quickly made his way to his duty station, where he fielded frantic calls from soldiers and commanders as they tried to make sense of the attack and mount some sort of defense. “I couldn’t tell them much more than they were being attacked,” he said.

Ward came from a poor family in Tennessee, where he began working the family farm while in the fifth grade, according to the Express-News. He joined the Army in 1935 at age 15 – under the erroneous belief that he was 17, as his father had led him to believe. “I told them I wanted to go overseas, and you know where they sent me? Hawaii,” Ward told the Express-News. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Wyatt Olson | March 1, 2021 ++]

Military Retirees & Veterans Events Schedule

As of 16 MAR 2021

The Military Retirees & Veterans Events Schedule is intended to serve as a one-stop resource for retirees and veterans seeking information about events such as retirement appreciation days (RAD), stand downs, veterans town hall meetings, resource fairs, free legal advice, mobile outreach services, airshows, and other beneficial community events. The events included on the schedule are obtained from military, VA, veterans service organizations and other reliable retiree/veterans related websites and resources.

The current Military Retirees & Veterans Events Schedule is available in the following three formats. After connecting to the website, click on the appropriate state, territory or country to check for events scheduled for your area.

- HTML: http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs_and_Other_Retiree-Veterans_Events.html.
- PDF: http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs_and_Other_Retiree-Veterans_Events.pdf.
- Word: http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs_and_Other_Retiree-Veterans_Events.doc.

Note that events listed on the Military Retirees & Veterans Events Schedule may be cancelled or rescheduled. Before traveling long distances to attend an event, you should contact the applicable RAO, RSO, event sponsor, etc., to ensure the event will, in fact, be held on the date\time indicated. Also, attendance at some events may require military ID, VA enrollment or DD214. Please report broken links, comments, corrections, suggestions, new RADs and\or other military retiree\vetterans related events to the Events Schedule Manager, Milton.Bell126@gmail.com [Source: Retiree\Veterans Events Schedule Manager | Milton Bell | March 15, 2021 ++]

Vet Hiring Fairs

Scheduled As of 16 MAR 2021

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce's (USCC) Hiring Our Heroes program employment workshops are available in conjunction with hundreds of their hiring fairs. These workshops are designed to help veterans and military spouses and include resume writing, interview skills, and one-on-one mentoring. To participate, sign up for the workshop in addition to registering (if indicated) for the hiring fairs which are shown on the Hiring Our Heroes website <https://www.hiringourheroes.org> for the next month. For details of each you should click on the city next to the date Listings of upcoming Vet Job Fairs nationwide providing location, times, events, and registration info if required can be found at the following websites. Note that some of the scheduled events for the next 2 to 6 weeks have been postponed and are awaiting reschedule dates due to the current COVID-19 outbreak. You will need to review each site below to locate Job Fairs in your location:

- <https://events.recruitmilitary.com>
- <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/events/hiringfairs>
- <https://www.legion.org/careers/jobfairs>

First Civilian Job

Forty-one percent of veterans surveyed indicated they left their first post-military job within one year. Another 31% indicated said they left their first civilian job to make ends meet and never intended to stay. Another 30% left as the result of finding a better job, while 19% left because the job did not align with their expectations. Only 12% left because the position was terminated or they were laid off. The reasons for staying at a job depend greatly on financial and long-term opportunities in the company. Sixty-five percent of veterans say they will stay at a company for better pay, while 55% stay for a clear path of career growth. Other activities, like veteran resource groups and volunteer activities, seem to have less impact on whether veterans remain or leave their jobs. [Source: Recruit Military, USCC, and American Legion | March 15, 2021 ++]

Vet Jobs

Update 271: U.S. Postal Service is Hiring Veterans

The United States Postal Service® has a long history of providing career opportunities to Veterans, reservists and their family members. USPS currently employs approximately 100,000 military members

and Veterans, and military service is treated as prior employment. USPS values the leadership, reliability, and high-tech skills Veterans bring to the organization, as well as their loyalty, leadership ability, reliability and integrity. If this sounds like you, consider the following USPS opportunities currently available on their Career website <https://about.usps.com/careers/welcome.htm>.

At the moment for example, USPS has several **Tractor Trailer Operators** employment opportunities. Check them out! Apply for open positions by clicking on “Search Now.” You can search by keyword “Transportation,” location, and/or functional area. For this position applicants must have a valid commercial driver’s license (CDL) from the state in which they live. If applicants have an intrastate CDL, they must self-certify to their state that they operate or expect to operate in excepted interstate commerce, as required by 49 CFR part 383.71(b)(1)(ii). Applicants must have a safe driving record, and at least two years of unsupervised experience driving passenger cars or larger vehicles and one year of full-time unsupervised experience (or equivalent) driving a 7-ton or larger truck, tractor-trailer, or a 16-passenger or larger bus. The driving must have taken place in the U.S. or its possessions or territories or in U.S. military installations worldwide. This job has an exam requirement. Examining will continue until capacity has been reached. USPS transportation job links listed include:

- TTO West Sacramento CA <https://go.usa.gov/xs5fA>
- TTO Melville NY <https://go.usa.gov/xs5GN>
- PSE TTO (New Work) San Diego CA <https://go.usa.gov/xs5GR>
- PSE TTO (New Work) City Of Industry <https://go.usa.gov/xs5Gy>
- TTO Milwaukee WI <https://go.usa.gov/xs5Gd>
- TTO Portland OR <https://go.usa.gov/xs5GG>
- TTO Fox Valley IL <https://go.usa.gov/xsRBz>
- TTO New Castle DE <https://go.usa.gov/xsRKC>
- TTO Seattle WA <https://go.usa.gov/xsRK2>
- TTO Minneapolis MN <https://go.usa.gov/xsnx6>
- TTO Saint Paul MN <https://go.usa.gov/xsnxF>
- PSE TTO Anaheim CA <https://go.usa.gov/xsnxM>
- TTO Forest Park IL <https://go.usa.gov/xsnxe>
- TTO Eagan MN <https://go.usa.gov/xsnxh>

A multitude of other positions of different types are also available nationwide. On the USPS’s Career website they are listed by category along with eligibility criteria and application guidelines. [Source: Vantage Point Blog | March 10, 2021 ++]

State Veteran’s Benefits

Iowa 2021

The state of Iowa provides a number of services and benefits to its veterans. To obtain information on these refer to the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “**State Veteran’s Benefits – IA**” for an overview of those in the below categories. They are available to veterans who are residents of the state. For a more detailed explanation of each of the below plus the state’s current position on veteran issues refer to ,

<http://www.military.com/benefits/veteran-state-benefits/iowa-state-veterans-benefits.html>,
<https://www.moaa.org/content/state-report-card/statereportcard>, and <https://va.iowa.gov>:

- Housing
- Financial Assistance
- Employment
- Education
- Recreation
- Driver and Vehicle Licensing
- Burial
- Taxation

[Source: <http://www.military.com/benefits/veteran-state-benefits/iowa-state-veterans-benefits.html> |
MAR 2021 ++]

*** Vet Legislation ***



VA Dental Care

Update 08: H.R.914: Dental Care for Veterans Act

Chairwoman Julia Brownley (D-CA) of the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health on 8 FEB introduced **H.R. 914, the Dental Care for Veterans Act**, legislation that would phase in eligibility for all veterans enrolled in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for health care to receive dental care as a part of its medical benefits package. This bill would require the VA Secretary to furnish dental care in the same manner as any other medical service, and defines a four-year implementation plan beginning with veterans in priority groups one and two—for veterans with service-connected disabilities rated at 30% or more—in year one. The bill currently has only 28 cosponsors.

Dental care has been proven to be an important part of overall health care. Many private employers and state Medicaid programs provide it as part of a comprehensive health care package. Most clinicians agree there are strong associations between significant dental issues and other adverse systemic health outcomes. Unfortunately gaps in dental coverage often affect people with lower incomes and complex health needs the most. DAV Resolution No. 185 calls for the VA to comprehensive dental care services to all service-connected disabled veterans enrolled for care. Therefore, DAV strongly supports this legislation. Readers are encouraged to go to <https://dav.quorum.us/campaign/31754> and send DAV's prepared editable message to their legislators to aid in support of this bill. [Source: <https://dav.quorum.us> | DAV Take Action | March 13, 2021 ++]

Medicare Auditory Coverage

H.R.1106 | Help Extend Auditory Relief (HEAR) Act

Recently, U.S. Representatives Matt Cartwright (D-PA.) and John Katko (R-NY) re-introduced the **Help Extend Auditory Relief (HEAR) Act H.R. 1106**, to expand hearing benefits for seniors on Medicare. Currently, Medicare Part B covers auditory examinations in the event of an accident or illness, but not routine checkups – which physicians recommend addressing gradual loss of hearing – or hearing aids. If prescribed a hearing device, the out-of-pocket expenses may be impossible to afford. Typical hearing aid models can cost over \$1,000, with the most state-of-the-art devices topping \$5,000. People who need devices for both ears face double the cost.

Specifically, the HEAR Act would amend the *Social Security Act* to include Medicare coverage for hearing rehabilitation, including a comprehensive audiology assessment to determine if a hearing aid is appropriate. It would also extend Medicare Part B coverage to hearing aid devices. This legislation is co-sponsored by U.S. Reps. Yvette Clarke (D-NY), Raul Grijalva (D-AZ), Alcee Hastings (D-L.), Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX), Betty McCollum (D-MN), David McKinley (R-WV), Jerrold Nadler (D-NY) and Mike Thompson (D-CA). The language of the bill is not yet available but as soon as it is TSCL will review it to determine their position on the legislation. [Source: MOAA Newsletter| February 24, 2021 ++]

COVID-19 Stimulus Package

H.R. 1319: The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021



The newest COVID19 relief package that was signed into law by President Joe Biden on March 11, 2021. H.R. 1319, The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, includes mandatory funding, program changes, and tax policies aimed primarily at mitigating the continuing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. It also includes additional relief to address impacts on the economy, public health, state and local governments, individuals, and businesses. You can find text of the bill [HERE](#). Specifically, the bill provides funding for:

- Agriculture and nutrition programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the food stamp program);
- Schools and institutions of higher education;
- Child care and programs for older Americans and their families;
- COVID-19 vaccinations, testing, treatment, and prevention;
- Mental health and substance-use disorder services;
- Emergency rental assistance, homeowner assistance, and other housing programs;
- Payments to state, local, tribal, and territorial governments for economic relief;
- Multiemployer pension plans;
- Small business assistance, including specific programs for restaurants and live venues;
- Programs for health care workers, transportation workers, federal employees, veterans, and other targeted populations;
- International and humanitarian responses;
- Tribal government services;
- Scientific research and development;
- State, territorial, and tribal capital projects that enable work, education, and health monitoring in response to COVID-19; and
- Health care providers in rural areas.

The bill also includes provisions that

- Extend unemployment benefits and related services;
- Make up to \$10,200 of 2020 unemployment compensation tax-free;
- Make student loan forgiveness tax-free through 2025;
- Provide a maximum recovery rebate of \$1,400 per eligible individual;
- Expand and otherwise modify certain tax credits, including the child tax credit and the earned income tax credit;
- Provide premium assistance for certain health insurance coverage; and
- Require coverage, without cost-sharing, of covid-19 vaccines and treatment under medicaid and he children's health insurance program (chip).

Stimulus Payments

- Individuals making \$75,000 or less a year and their dependents each would receive checks totaling the full amount of \$1,400. The payments decrease gradually for individuals earning above \$75,000 — and they phase out completely for individuals making \$80,000 or more. That’s a change from a prior income cap of \$100,000.
- Couples who file taxes jointly and earn \$150,000 or less a year and their dependents each will get full payments of \$1,400. The checks become gradually smaller for joint filers making above \$150,000, and they phase out entirely at \$160,000. That’s a change from a prior income cap of \$200,000 for couples.
- “Head of household” filers, such as single parents, would see a phase-out starting above an income level of \$112,500 and no payments at \$120,000 vs. a previous cap of \$150,000.

[Source: The Enlisted Association | March 12, 2021 ++]

Coronavirus Death Certificates

S.89 | Ensuring Survivor Benefits during COVID-19 Act of 2021

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) reports that there have been 215,171 coronavirus cases afflicting veterans using VA health care services, and more than 9,500 veteran deaths as of February 5, 2021. DAV is concerned that some of the survivors of service-disabled veterans will be denied benefits because of a death certificate that lists the cause of death as COVID-19 and does not mention the service-connected conditions that may have contributed to their cause of death. On January 28, 2021, Senators Kyrsten Sinema (AZ) and Senator Thom Tillis (NC) re-introduced **S. 89, the Ensuring Survivors Benefits during COVID-19 Act**, which would address this issue by requiring the Department of Veterans Affairs seek a medical opinion in the case of any veteran who has a service-connected condition and who passes away due to the coronavirus. This medical opinion could be crucial in obtaining survivors' benefits.

The bill was read twice and referred to the Committee on Veterans' Affairs. To date this legislation only has 9 cosponsors. Veterans are requested to ask their legislators to support this bill to help ensure adequate compensation to the survivors of veterans whose deaths are held to be service connected. An easy to do that is to go to <https://dav.quorum.us/campaign/31359>, enter you contact data, and forward the editable prepared DAV message to you Senators.

[Source: DAV Commander's Action Network | Leo Shane III | March 4, 2021 ++]

Vet Toxic Exposure | Karshi-Khanabad

Update 06: H.R.1355/S.454 | K2 Veterans Care Act

Nearly two decades after troops first deployed to a former Soviet airbase in Uzbekistan veterans say was a source of significant toxic exposures, members of Congress are moving to provide care and benefits for the ill veterans and families of those who have died. House and Senate lawmakers introduced the **K2 Veterans Care Act** on 25 FEB, which aims to provide a presumption of service-connected illness for veterans who served at the airbase, qualifying them for Department of Veterans Affairs care and benefits. Rep. Mark Green (R-TN) and Steven Lync (D-MA), introduced the bill in the House and Democratic Sens. Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, Bob Menendez of New Jersey, Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin and Sherrod Brown of Ohio, introduced a companion bill in the Senate.

More than 15,000 veterans who served at a secret, repurposed Soviet-era airbase in Karshi-Khanabad, Uzbekistan known as "K2," may have been exposed to dangerous levels of radiation and other hazards, including "black good" oozing up from the ground. Now, nearly two decades later, Congress is pushing for those veterans to receive care and benefits from VA. Documents declassified in 2020 showed the Department of Defense knew service members were exposed to multiple toxic substances or hazardous materials at the base at the onset of the War on Terror that later led to cancers and other severe or fatal health conditions. But the Department of Veterans Affairs has continually denied many of those veterans care and benefits.

Rep. Green flew through K2 during his Army service and is himself a cancer survivor -- cancer he attributes to his exposure to burn pits on deployments. He's led several legislative efforts on behalf of K2 veterans. "The presumption of service connection is the crucial piece of the puzzle to ensure America's K2 veterans receive healthcare and benefits reflective of their service and sacrifice," Green told Connecting Vets. "For over two decades, these veterans have suffered from rare cancers and devastating illnesses linked to toxic exposure in Uzbekistan. K2 veterans and their families have waited long enough for answers and care. Our bipartisan, bicameral legislation marks a significant step towards swift justice for America's K2 veterans."

The declassified Pentagon documents showed the base was built on a foundation of dangerous levels of radiation. Defense officials estimated that more than 15,000 troops served at and may have been exposed at K2, or "Camp Stronghold Freedom." The U.S. military occupied the base from at least 2001-05 and it is currently home to the 60th Separate Mixed Aviation Brigade of the Uzbek Air Force. Defense officials have characterized the base as a crucial hub at the start of the war. The base, constructed quickly above what turned out to be the remains of a former chemical weapons factory, was only recently added to an official toxic exposure registry after Congressional action, though veterans who served on the base, or their families, have shared stories of how they have sickened and died because of toxic exposure there. Those veterans reported symptoms from gastrointestinal illnesses and neurological disorders to rare cancers. They described "black goo" oozing up from the ground, glowing green ponds and large warning signs cautioning troops to keep out of areas on the base because of chemical agents.

Legislation requiring more studies is key to formally link the exposures to potential illnesses veterans may experience, but it does little to help veterans ill and dying now, and continues to push the timeline for benefits decisions. Those continued delays are echoes of Vietnam-era veterans, some of whom still struggle to receive benefits for exposure to Agent Orange and other toxic defoliants. Frustration in Congress has grown in recent years, as excuses of cost and capacity for VA continue to roadblock progress. K2 veterans and surviving family members testified before Congress a year ago, saying they knew of at least 400 people diagnosed with cancers after serving at the base, and at least 30 who had died.

Military researchers found the soil K2 was built on had "elevated levels of volatile organic compounds and total petroleum hydrocarbons were detected at numerous locations throughout Stronghold Freedom, including in a tent city, eastern expansion area and adjacent to the aircraft maintenance facility," according to a 2001 health assessment. Even the air at K2 was dangerous, according to the report, which found the ambient air around the base the "main exposure pathway of concern for environmental contaminants. "Inhalation of vapors from exposed, subsurface fuel contaminated soils could potentially cause adverse health effects to personnel at Stronghold Freedom," the report said. A 2002 report recommended Defense Department personnel not dig in the soil "contaminated with jet fuel" though the same areas were, at least at one time, covered in tents service members lived in and aircraft hangars they worked in, according to the Pentagon documents.

Former VA spokeswoman Christina Noel said last year the department had obtained the Defense Department's roster of K2 personnel and had launched a study of the health outcomes of veterans who served there, but initial results are not expected for another 11 months. The Defense Department conducted an initial study of cancers among troops deployed to K2, which found a higher risk of "malignant melanoma and neoplasms of the lymphatic and hematopoietic tissues (not including Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma and

Leukemia)." VA dismissed those findings, arguing they were based on "only a few cases of each type of cancer and should not be viewed as definitive evidence of an association with service at K2."

Green and Lynch previously partnered on a Congressional investigation of the hazards of K2 and part of their legislation was included in the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act, directing the Defense Department to conduct a more comprehensive study on K2 toxic exposures. Green's office also worked with Pentagon officials and the Trump administration on an executive order signed by the former president on his final day in office, directing the secretary of Defense to designate Uzbekistan as a combat zone for the purposes of medical care qualification. The Department of Veterans Affairs website lists several hazardous exposures veterans of K2 may have encountered, including:

- Jet fuel that soaked the ground, leaking from a Soviet-era underground jet fuel distribution system;
- Volatile organic compounds from "jet fuel vapors that did not exceed military exposure guidelines or other health exposure criteria," according to VA;
- Depleted uranium from the Soviet missiles stored and destroyed at K2, contaminating the ground;
- Particulate matter and dust, a common hazard for all troops who served in the Southwest Asia theater of operations;
- Asbestos in roof tiles and dirt;
- Lead-based paint at the K2 one-stop, in-processing center.

"Environmental assessments also confirmed the absence of chemical warfare agents and ionizing radiation on K2," according to VA. VA encourages veterans to file a disability claim if they believe they have health conditions related to their K2 service, adding that the claims "are decided on a case-by-case basis" since the department has no existing presumptive conditions related to the base. Despite the many reports of veterans with severe health conditions, or those who have died because of their K2 exposures, Army documents discourage K2 veterans from seeking medical screenings.

"You do not need to get a medical examination or have additional medical screenings just because you were at K2," a fact sheet from the Army Public Health Center reads, though it advises service members concerned about deployment-related conditions to speak to primary healthcare providers and veterans to file disability claims. "There are no specific health recommendations related to a deployment at K2," the Army document reads. "In general, you can reduce your risk of developing medical conditions and experiencing injuries by following a healthy lifestyle."

[Source: Connecting Vets | Abbie Bennett | February 25, 2021 ++]

Vet Service Dogs

Update 28: H.R.1022 | Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers

A measure reintroduced 11 FEB in the House would order the Department of Veterans Affairs to pay for and provide service dogs to veterans suffering from mental health issues, following years of fruitless attempts. The Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers, or **PAWS, Act**, introduced by Rep. John Rutherford (R-FL) would require the VA to create a grant program to pay for and provide service dogs to veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health ailments.

The VA covers some costs of service dogs for veterans with certain physical disabilities, such as blindness, but has never conceded that the animals are beneficial as a mental health treatment, despite studies showing dog therapy can be a critical tool for treating such patients. The agency has been researching the topic for more than a decade. It wrapped up its latest study last year and found that veterans with service dogs pose a lower risk of suicide than those with emotional support animals. However, the VA has not yet released the study publicly. "Research from VA has concluded that service dogs are a proven therapy for those suffering from PTSD," Rutherford said at a media event 3 MAR.

Service dogs have formal training and credentialing, as opposed to emotional support animals, which do not need either. However, VA doctors can designate a veteran's pet as a support animal, allowing patients to skirt around hurdles from landlords and breed restrictions in some municipalities. In some cases, it makes it easier to fly with the animal. The VA tried to study the benefits of providing service dogs to veterans in 2011, but the effort was halted after two service dogs bit children in veterans' homes. Further problems with the health and training of some of the dogs led to a second suspension of the study in 2012, according to the department.

This is the fourth time the PAWS Act has been introduced in some form. It passed the House last year but gained no traction in the Senate. Lawmakers and advocates have pointed to growing academic evidence of the benefits of service dogs, including the VA's unreleased study. That study concedes their usefulness, which could give the effort momentum. Providing service dogs to veterans is seen by some as a much-needed alternative therapy amid a widely acknowledged suicide crisis. Between 2005 and 2018, 89,160 veterans died by suicide, according to the most recent data from the VA -- more than the number of Americans killed in each major U.S. conflict except World War II and the Civil War.

Despite a seemingly endless wave of good intentions from Congress and a ballooning VA budget, there's no evidence the federal government has put a dent into the veteran suicide crisis, with VA's data showing little change in the suicide numbers each year. The agency hasn't announced any new high-profile initiatives, a stark contrast to the lightning speed with which the Biden administration has tackled other issues since January. "Frankly, it's comical except it's not funny that the VA has been studying this issue, thinking about it, pondering over it for a decade," said Rep. Michael Waltz (R-FL). "Veterans should have a full menu of options and different types of therapies, whether that's service dogs, hyperbaric chambers, or other alternative therapy. We have to get out of this paradigm of just providing drugs to vets."

The bill would give grants of up to \$25,000 to eligible organizations to provide service dogs for veterans. K9s for Warriors, a group heavily lobbying for the effort, trains rescue dogs and matches them to veterans suffering from PTSD. Nonprofits are one of the only avenues for veterans to adopt service dogs. The VA doesn't provide any funds for service or emotional support animals but concluded a congressionally mandated study on the benefits of dogs for PTSD care last July. One of K9s for Warriors' clients emphasized the importance of service dogs. "When I came back from Iraq, I found myself with a lot of anxiety and depression," said Becca Stephens, an Iraq War veteran who was paired with a dog through the group. "For seven years, I was a full-blown heroin junkie. ... I often refer it to the greatest dating match-up; since getting Bobi in 2018, I have been completely sober. She just brings the life out of me."

[Source: Military.com | Steve Beynon | March 3, 2021 ++]

Vet Adaptive Car Grant

S.444/H.R.0000 | The AUTO for Veterans Act

U.S. Senators Susan Collins (R-ME) and Joe Manchin (D-WV) introduced bipartisan legislation that would reduce the financial burden for severely disabled veterans who require special adaptive equipment to drive a motor vehicle. **The Advancing Uniform Transportation Opportunities (AUTO) for Veterans Act** would make these veterans eligible to receive a grant to help purchase a new adaptive vehicle once every ten years, helping them to drive safely and maintain their independence. Companion legislation was introduced in the House 25 FEB by Representatives Dan Meuser (R-PA) and David Trone (D-MD).

“Our nation owes American veterans our deepest gratitude. We must continue to honor that commitment to our veterans by supporting their needs, including those of disabled veterans who require adaptive modification of their vehicles long after they are discharged or retire from active duty,” said Senator Collins. “One disabled veteran in Shirley, Maine, has had to purchase several adaptive vehicles since 1999, with each one lasting more than 250,000 miles. He will soon need a new van that will cost him well over \$50,000, which is more than he paid for his home. The AUTO for Veterans Act is an important step in helping those who have served our nation so honorably and sacrificed so much for our freedom. I urge all of our colleagues to join Senator Manchin and me in honoring and supporting our nation’s veterans.”

“Our Veterans have sacrificed so much to protect their fellow Americans and now it is our turn to support them after their years of selfless service. The AUTO for Veterans Act would provide our paralyzed Veterans with a new vehicle every 10 years instead of the current program which only provides one vehicle in their lifetime,” said Senator Manchin. “This commonsense legislation will be especially important for the Veterans who live in more rural states such as West Virginia and rely on personal vehicles to go about their daily lives. *Advancing Uniform Transportation Opportunities (AUTO) for Veterans Act*,” said Heather Ansley, Associate Executive Director of Government Relations at Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) said, “This bill would help veterans preserve the freedom and independence that adapted vehicles provide them, ensuring they are able to travel safely to and from work, medical appointments, and family obligations.” PVA applauded all involved for reintroducing the legislation

The VA is currently authorized to provide eligible veterans with a one-time grant of approximately \$21,400 to be used to purchase a new or used automobile and necessary adaptive equipment, such as specialized pedals or switches. The grant is often used together with the VA Special Adaptive Equipment Grants, which help veterans purchase adaptive equipment, such as powered lifts, for an existing automobile or van to make it safe for a veteran’s use. The average cost to replace modified vehicles ranges from \$20,000 to \$80,000 when the vehicle is new and \$21,000 to \$35,000 when the vehicle is used.

Although veterans can receive multiple Special Adaptive Equipment Grants over the course of their lives, they are limited to a single grant to purchase a vehicle. The current limitation fails to take into account that a disabled veteran will need more than one vehicle in his or her lifetime. According to the Department of Transportation, the average useful life of a vehicle is 11.8 years, and a vehicle that has been modified structurally tends to have a shorter useful life. [Source: <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/2020/07/02/senate-section/article/S4224-1> | March 2021 ++]

Coronavirus Vaccines

Update 32: S.682 | Saves Lives Act

An effort is underway in Congress to mandate the Department of Veterans Affairs to vaccinate all U.S. veterans against the coronavirus, as well as their spouses and caregivers. Four senators on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee plan to introduce legislation Tuesday that would expand the population that the VA can vaccinate. The department is currently vaccinating employees and veterans enrolled into VA health care, as well as some veteran caregivers. The "Saves Lives Act" would order the department to vaccinate any veteran, even if he or she is not eligible for VA health care. Under the bill, more caregivers would be eligible for a vaccine through the VA, as would spouses of veterans, veterans living abroad and recipients of the VA's CHAMPVA program. The CHAMPVA program serves spouses and children of veterans permanently and totally disabled due to a service-related disability.

"The goal is to try to help as many people around the veterans get a shot so that everybody can feel comfortable," Jon Tester (D-MT) said during an interview 8 MAR. Along with Tester, Sens. John Boozman (R-AR), Jerry Moran (R-KS), and Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) are introducing the bill. Boozman said he heard from several veterans in his state who were unhappy that their spouses couldn't get vaccinated when they did. During a Senate hearing 24 FEB, Boozman brought up the issue with Dr. Richard Stone, the VA's acting undersecretary for health. Stone said that because of federal law, the VA wasn't allowed to vaccinate spouses. "So you need additional legislative relief to get there?" Boozman asked. "Maybe that's something the chairman and I can work on."

The legislation would add millions more people to the population that the VA is responsible for vaccinating. There are about 6 million veterans who actively use VA health care, as well as 450,000 employees. As of 8 MAR, the VA had vaccinated 2.8 million, with slightly more than 1 million receiving both doses of the Moderna or Pfizer vaccines. The senators aren't concerned about the department's logistics. During the hearing 24 FEB, Stone said that the VA can vaccinate 350,000 to 600,000 people each week – about double the number it's currently vaccinating. The senators said they want to harness the VA's resources to get more people vaccinated at a faster pace. "They've shown they can do a good job, a timely job, to get shots into peoples' arms," Tester said of the VA. "This is going to help everybody because a lot of states are having a hard time getting shots in arms. That's not the case with the VA anywhere that I know of."

However, to vaccinate a larger population, the department would need more doses. In February, the VA was allotted about 125,000 doses each week, which Stone called an "austere amount." At the end of February, the department received an additional allotment of 600,000 doses. Last week, it received its initial shipment of the newly approved Johnson & Johnson vaccine, adding 71,400 doses. Tester and Boozman said the VA would need to negotiate with the Department of Health and Human Services to receive more. Their bill urges HHS to allot more vaccines to the VA as the supply chain allows.

"The biggest challenge is getting more vaccines to the VA," Tester said. "I think we need to continue to press, and I think the VA needs to continue to press, whether it's HHS or whoever it is, to get as many vaccines as possible." The senators hope to get the "Saves Lives Act", which was introduced on 10 MAR, to the Senate floor for a vote in the next few weeks. The House introduced a narrower version of the bill earlier this month, titled the "H.R.1276 VA Vaccine Act" which was passed in the House on 9 MAR and received in the Senate on 10 MAR. The House version aims to expand vaccinations through the VA to all

veterans, regardless of their eligibility for VA health care, as well as caregivers and veterans living abroad. It does not include spouses. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Nikki Wentling | March 8, 2021 ++]

Note: To check status on any veteran related legislation go to <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress> for any House or Senate bill introduced in the 116th Congress. Bills are listed in reverse numerical order for House and then Senate. Bills are normally initially assigned to a congressional committee to consider and amend before sending them on to the House or Senate as a whole. To read the text of bills that are to be considered on the House floor in the upcoming week refer to <https://docs.house.gov/floor>.

*** Military ***



Military Leave Policy

Update 01: Bereavement Leave Under Consideration by Air Force

Nearly two years after then-Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Kaleth Wright first said he wanted it, the Air Force is still working on a policy that would allow airmen to take time off to grieve the death of a family member or similar hardship without it counting towards their 30 days of annual leave time. The top enlisted leader of the Air Force, Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force JoAnne Bass, told Task & Purpose she is a “firm believer” in creating a bereavement leave category, but there are several hoops to jump through before such a policy can become real, including Congressional approval. And the Air Force is also working with other services to possibly create a joint policy.

“It’s something we are currently getting after and working with our sister-service senior enlisted leaders to find the best way forward to take care of our people,” Bass said. “In the interim, we are looking at other options for our airmen to have the time needed to grieve over the loss of a family member through non-chargeable means.” To be clear, at the moment the Air Force does not have a specific bereavement leave policy for airmen who need to take time off to tend to loved ones who are sick or who have passed away. Airmen currently can take emergency leave, where they pull from their 30 days of normal leave time, or they can take emergency leave of absence, a new option that was announced last September.

The new option gives airmen up to 14 consecutive, nonchargeable days to attend to the death or serious medical condition of an immediate family member or other appropriate hardship without counting towards the airman’s total leave days. The problem is, emergency leave of absence can be granted only once in an airman’s entire career; it is only used to cover immediate family members; and it exists only to prevent the airman from going over their 30-day annual leave cap. So if you’ve already used the option or if you are far from your leave cap for the year, or if it’s not involving a close family member, you’re out of luck.

The terms ‘emergency leave’ and ‘emergency leave of absence,’ are way too similar to keep from getting them confused, so here is a breakdown to make things easier:

- Emergency leave: Counts towards normal leave, no restrictions on how often it can be granted.
- Emergency leave of absence: Does not count towards normal leave; lasts up to 14 consecutive days; can only be granted once in an airman’s career and only if they are close to hitting their normal leave cap; and only for immediate family members.

Former Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force Wright first made a call for nonchargeable bereavement leave in 2019. He pointed out that airmen must currently pull from their 30 days of normal leave for bereavement trips. That’s unfortunate for airmen who, for example, spend their workdays getting fried at under-staffed maintenance shops and then have to spend half their allotted normal leave time planning their grandparent’s funeral. “Someone looked and said, ‘Hey, the average E-4 or E-5 has a set number of days of leave on the books already, and they should be using that leave,’” Wright told Air Force Magazine. “That may be true. But fundamentally, I think [bereavement leave is] the right thing to do.”

Wright told the magazine that it was never a problem for him coming up in the ranks to get approval from commanders for temporary duty travel for basketball games, but when he needed travel for family reasons, he would have to use leave. Approved personal leave also might not give airmen enough time to manage the deceased’s estate or set up a funeral, he said.

Last September, the Air Force appeared to move forward on Wright’s proposal by announcing the emergency leave of absence option. However, as pointed out earlier, there are limitations on that option which might not help as much as a dedicated, nonchargeable bereavement leave category. The Air Force said it’s still too soon to tell how a potential bereavement policy might differ from those other two leave options. “It is premature to discuss since there is not a bereavement leave policy for the Department of the Air Force,” said Air Force spokesperson Maj. Holly Hess.

Civilians employed by the Air Force already have 104 hours (13 days) of sick leave for family care of bereavement purposes. Unlike the emergency leave of absence policy, which only applies to immediate family members, the civilian definition of ‘family member’ also covers everything from grandparents to domestic partners to in-laws. There is also an advanced sick leave for more serious cases which covers up to 240 hours (30 days). Until such a policy exists (and even after, most likely) for airmen, it is largely supervisor-dependent how much leave you might actually get to attend to a family emergency.

“Many chains, especially ones like Security Forces and maintenance deny members, based on Air Force Instructions,” the administrator of the popular Facebook page Air Force amn/nc0/snco at <https://www.facebook.com/AirForceForum> wrote 21 FEB on Facebook. “They aren’t wrong, but what good chains have done and are doing is having a member do a *memorandum for record* stating the person was akin to their primary caregiver, then due to readiness, approving the Airmen’s leave. The good chains basically are taking care of their people while the AFI is being worked and the bad chains are using the AFI to deny. Pray you’re in a good chain if an extended family member dies and also pray the change happens soon before more Airmen get denied, hurting their wellness, readiness and the mission.” [Source: Task & Purpose | David Roza | February 24, 2021 ++]

U.S. Capitol Riot

Update 11: National Guard Troops To Receive Ribbons for Protecting Nation's Capital



National Guard troops who deployed to the nation's capital to provide security following 6 JAN riot at the Capitol Building will be awarded local service ribbons, a defense official said 5 MAR. The District of Columbia National Guard plans to award at least one of two ribbons to all soldiers and airmen who supported the security mission before, during and after the 59th presidential inauguration in recognition of their service, Air Force Lt. Col. Robert Carver, the spokesman for the Virginia Air National Guard and the director of the Joint Task Force- District of Columbia's Joint Information Center, said in a statement.

More than 26,000 National Guard members from all 50 states, D.C., and three territories were deployed ahead of the inauguration to support local and federal law enforcement agencies following the deadly Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol. Since the inauguration, most of the troops have returned home. As of 2 MAR, 5,214 remain in Washington, according to the Pentagon. While the mission was expected to end 12 MAR, the U.S. Capitol Police have requested the Defense Department extend the deployment for two months. The two ribbons that National Guard troops could receive are the District of Columbia National Guard Presidential Inauguration Support Ribbon or the District of Columbia Emergency Service Ribbon, according to Carver. The inauguration ribbon is also a new decoration, he said.

The ribbons have stripes of red, white, and blue, and the presidential inauguration ribbon includes the three red stars in its center. Carver could not provide details on the exact dates of eligibility for the ribbons, but he said the understanding is Guard members who were deployed to Washington from Jan. 6 to now are eligible. The ribbons are district-level decorations and also being considered are federal-level decorations, he said. There are no final plans for when the ribbons will be presented. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Caitlin M. Kenney | March 5, 2021 ++]

Disability Pre-Discharge Claim

VA Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) Program

If you have an illness or injury that you believe was caused—or made worse—by your active-duty service, you can file a claim for disability benefits 180 to 90 days before you leave the military. This may help speed up the claim decision process so you can get your monthly compensation sooner. Find out how to file a claim through the Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program—and what to do if you have less than 90 days left on active duty. During the coronavirus pandemic you can still file a claim and apply for benefits during. For information on this go to [coronavirus FAQs](#) to get the latest about in-person services, claim exams, extensions, paperwork, decision reviews and appeals, and how best to contact us during this time.

Who is eligible for BDD

To use the BDD program to enable you to get your disability compensation sooner you must meet all of the following requirements:

- You're a service member on full-time active duty (including a member of the National Guard, Reserves, or Coast Guard), **and**
- You have a known separation date, **and**
- Your separation date is in the next 180 to 90 days, **and**
- You're available to go to VA exams for 45 days from the date you submitted your claim, **and**
- You can provide a copy of your service treatment records for your current period of service when you file your claim

Who is ineligible to use BDD

If you have less than 90 days left on active duty you can't file a BDD claim or add more medical conditions to your initial claim. But you can still begin the process of filing your claim before discharge. Click on [file a claim less than 90 days before discharge](#) to learn how. To learn about filing a fully developed or standard claim go to <https://www.va.gov/disability/how-to-file-claim>. For needed evidence refer to <https://www.va.gov/disability/how-to-file-claim/evidence-needed>. The difference in these claim types is based on how you gather evidence (supporting documents like a doctor's report and medical test results) to support your claim.

You can't use the BDD program if your claim requires special handling—even if you're on full-time active duty, with more than 90 days left of service. You can't use the BDD program if any of these are true. You:

- Need case management for a serious injury or illness, **or**
- Are terminally ill, **or**
- Are waiting to be discharged while being treated at a VA hospital or military treatment facility, **or**
- Are pregnant, **or**
- Are waiting for us to determine your Character of Discharge, **or**
- Can't go to a VA exam during the 45-day period after you submit your claim, **or**
- Didn't submit copies of your service treatment records for your current period of service, **or**
- Added a medical condition to your original claim when you had less than 90 days left on active duty (**Note:** We'll process the added conditions after your discharge.), **or**
- Need to have a VA exam done in a foreign country, except if the exam can be requested by the overseas BDD office in either Landstuhl, Germany, or Camp Humphreys, Korea
[Learn more about filing a pre-discharge claim while overseas](#)

Transition Support

The VA's Transition Assistance Program (TAP) can help both you and your family with this transition. They will help you find out which VA benefits and services you're entitled to, like health care, career guidance, training, and counseling. Refer to <https://www.benefits.va.gov/transition/tap.asp> to learn more about TAP. Other benefits you can apply for while in pre-discharge status:

- [Education benefits](#) -- Apply for and manage education benefits (like Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits) that you can use to pay for college and training programs.
- [Housing assistance](#) -- Find out if you qualify for a VA home loan or a housing grant to help you live more independently with your service-connected disability.

- [Veteran Readiness and Employment \(VR&E\) -- If you have a service-connected disability that limits your ability to work or prevents you from working, find out if you can get VR&E benefits and services—like help exploring employment options and getting more training if required.](#)

[Source: Veterans Benefits Newsletter | March 2021 ++]

NORAD

Threats It Used To Miss are Now Seen with Artificial Intelligence Use

The U.S. military command charged with watching and protecting North American airspace is now using artificial intelligence to detect the threats that previously slipped its notice. The new capability, named Pathfinder, fuses data from military, commercial and government sensors to create a common operating picture for North American Aerospace Defense Command and U.S. Northern Command. “It essentially takes and ingests — aggregates — data from multiple systems, data that would in the past have been ... left on the cutting room floor and not analyzed or assessed in a timely manner,” said Gen. Glen VanHerck, who commands NORAD and USNORTHCOM, during the Air Force Association’s virtual Air Warfare Symposium last week.

“The Pathfinder program uses machine learning to help us analyze that data from multiple systems — not only military systems, but commercial systems, other government agency systems.” Previously that data stayed in separate systems, preventing NORAD from seeing the whole picture and allowing potential threats to slip through unnoticed. VanHerck pointed to a 2015 incident when a gyrocopter landed on the White House lawn as an example of how stovepiped systems prevented NORAD from seeing a potential threat.



“When you go back and look at that scenario, when you look at those systems that monitor the national Capitol region individually, no single system had full awareness or saw that gyrocopter,” he explained. Pathfinder solves that problem by taking the data from each of those systems and fusing it into a common operating picture. In developing Pathfinder, NORAD virtually recreated the 2015 event by plugging the data from that day into its new AI-machine learning capability. “We took Pathfinder and applied it to the available systems, the actual data, and used Pathfinder capabilities to assess that data,” said VanHerck. “And sure enough, there that gyrocopter was and he was easily detected by that point.”

To prototype pathfinder, NORAD partnered with the Defense Innovation Unit, a Pentagon organization that specializes in using emerging commercial technologies for military purposes. DIU Director Mike

Brown said in December that Pathfinder was completed in record time — just a few months over a year. In February, Kinetica announced it received a \$100 million, five-year contract from the U.S. Air Force to use the Kinetica Streaming Data Warehouse for Pathfinder. The company’s service “ingests, analyzes and visualizes massive data sets ... in order to model possible outcomes and assess risk,” according to Kinetica’s description.

“We’re using it today,” said VanHerck. “It’s out in our fields and our sectors right now. Historically our sectors were very manually driven — phone calls to pass data, etc. Today we fuse all that data together, and we’re seeing the picture much more real-time and much more in an automatic type of digital environment.” Pathfinder can fuse data from more than 300 sensors to build its common operating picture, Brown noted. Beyond helping NORAD find more potential threats, Pathfinder also enables operators to move faster to assess those threats. “We dramatically reduced their decision time — they have about 12 minutes to make a decision if they really thought there was an attack coming in over North American airspace — and we’ve cut minutes off that by giving them this common operating picture,” said Brown.

In many ways, Pathfinder is a microcosm of the Pentagon’s Joint All Domain Command and Control concept, which seeks to use AI and emerging technologies to connect every sensor to the best shooter. “What we’ve been able to do with NORAD in this fusing of sensor data and providing a common operating picture for better decision making, if you think about it, that’s the guts of what’s in JADC2,” said Brown. “That technology is going to continue to have broad applicability. And I won’t be surprised at all as we work on some other projects to see other applications of that basic technology be delivered.” “I absolutely believe it can be a model for the Department of Defense,” said VanHerck. “It lays the foundation for improved data-driven decision-making and enhanced capability.” [Source: C4ISRNET | Nathan Strout | March 1, 2021 ++]

Military Uniforms

Update 07: Report Finds ‘Pink Tax’ on Women’s

A new congressionally ordered report into the out-of-pocket costs incurred by service members for uniform items confirms the long-held suspicion of many female troops that they're paying more than their male counterparts -- and shows that sometimes the difference is dramatic. The 52-page report, released 25 FEB by the Government Accountability Office, outlines the realities of what some have called the "pink tax:" the higher cost of female uniform items, often not fully covered by clothing allowances.

The report finds, among other things, that the costs of essentials not included in the allowance calculations are significantly higher for women than men in every service; that female officers have been disproportionately burdened by numerous uniform changes over the past decades requiring the purchase of new items; and that out-of-pocket uniform costs for enlisted women can add up to \$8,000 or more over a career, while some men report pocketing allowance overages.

GAO was tasked with analyzing uniform costs to service members after Rep. Julia Brownley (D-CA) inserted a provision into the fiscal 2020 defense policy bill calling for data on reported gender disparities. “As Chair of the Women Veterans Task Force, one of the issues I hear about most from currently-serving servicewomen is that they are consistently required to pay more for uniforms than men,” Brownley said

in a statement 25 FEB. "This report shows that both enlisted women and female officers are required to spend many times more than men on their uniforms ... I am committed to crafting legislation to rectify the concerns laid out in this report."

Enlisted troops' initial clothing allowance and clothing replacement allowances are determined annually and differ by service and gender. Across the board, initial clothing allowances are much higher for women, based on the items they need to acquire, such as handbags and physical training clothing. The annual basic clothing replacement allowance rates, however, are nearly equivalent for men and women for each service, ranging from roughly \$310 in the Army to nearly \$700 in the Marine Corps. Officers receive an initial clothing allowance as well, but then are expected to pay out-of-pocket for uniform items for the remainder of their career.

By and large, the money provided by the services simply does not go as far for women as it does for men, the GAO report found. Between fiscal years 2015 and 2020, it found, the clothing replacement allowances covered 61.2% of costs for women in the Army and 69.3% for men. In the Air Force, the reimbursement rate for men was 91.2%, compared with just 76.3% for women. The same trend was consistent across every service. Tracking across the course of a career shows how costs can accumulate over time. A chart compiled by GAO shows female enlisted soldiers accumulate an average of \$5,000 in out-of-pocket uniform costs by their 5th year of service, and more than \$8,000 by year 20; male soldiers, by comparison, averaged out-of-pocket costs of less than \$4,000 by the 20-year mark.

The only group that reported being able to save some of their uniform replacement allowance over the course of a career was Air Force men, who pocketed an average of \$2,000 by the 20-year mark. GAO also found that six of the 18 uniform changes made by the various military services affected only women: those within the Navy and Marine Corps aimed at developing a more unisex look across the ranks. Many of these were initiated by former Navy Secretary Ray Mabus and had the unintended consequence of saddling women in service with replacing still-serviceable uniform items. The report found that part of the disparity seen in out-of-pocket uniform costs was because a number of items military women need are deemed "not uniquely military" and don't factor into clothing allowance calculations.

"Uniform items that the services have determined are required and that enlisted female service members must pay for beyond initial issuance in fiscal year 2020 include handbags for the Army, swimsuits for the Navy, and dress pumps for the Air Force and the Marine Corps," it stated. "While enlisted male service members also receive in their initial provision of clothing some items such as male underwear, undershirts, and athletic socks for which they do not receive a clothing replacement allowance, those items are generally less costly to replace than similar items that females must replace out-of-pocket."

Another factor is the higher cost of some female uniform items, the report notes. "For example, in fiscal year 2020, the Army's Service Uniform coat costs about \$108 for female officers and about \$126 for male officers," it said. "Conversely, officials also told us the lower number of female versus male uniform items ordered by the DLA often results in higher per item costs for female items. For example, the Army estimates the new Army Green Service Uniform dress coat will cost about \$163 for enlisted females and \$82 for enlisted males."

For a House policy aide who worked on the bill that prompted the report and discussed the matter with Military.com on background, that's not a good enough reason to make female troops pay more, however. "I don't know how 'women's uniforms cost more to make' is still an acceptable excuse for people who are

putting their lives on the line for the country," the aide said. The root issue is pay equity, the aide added. "The equity principle also calls for the concept of equal pay for substantially equal work under the same general working conditions," the report states. " ... Specifically, comparability refers to the specific items of basic pay, basic-pay related items, allowances, and benefits."

The GAO's recommendations for change included the development of new criteria for determining which clothing items are considered uniquely military, with consistency across the services; a periodic review of items included in the services' clothing replacement allowance calculations; a requirement that military services submit plans to the Defense Department for changing uniform items, with cost estimates, before making a change; and an assessment of expected out-of-pocket cost differences for service members in connection with a uniform change.

The DoD concurred with all recommendations, according to the report. The policy aide suggested two more changes, based on feedback from female service members: subsidize the cost difference of uniform items that are more expensive for women; and provide a one-time stipend to current female troops to account for disproportionate out-of-pocket costs they've already incurred. [Source: Military.com | Hope Hodge Seck | February 25, 2021 ++]

USS John C. Stennis

Navy's \$3 Billion Plan to Rebuild an Aircraft Carrier



“Look Ahead” is an apt motto for the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis (CVN-74), as last week the Department of Defense (DoD) announced that the United States Navy has awarded Newport News-based Huntington Ingalls Industries’ (HII) Newport News Shipbuilding division a \$2.99 billion contract to refuel and overhaul the supercarrier. The 1,092-foot long carrier will reenter service following the overhaul, which is scheduled to be completed in 2025. That will give the Navy something to Look Ahead to when the ship reenters service.

“Our teams have spent three years preparing and planning for each step of the process along the way, and we look forward to continuing our work with our suppliers and Navy partners in anticipation of the ship’s arrival at Newport News,” Todd West, Newport News Shipbuilding’s vice president, in-service aircraft carrier programs, said in a statement. The refueling and complex overhaul (RCOH) essentially marks the “half-way” point in a carrier’s lifecycle and includes about thirty-five percent of all maintenance

and modernization of the carrier's fifty-year service life. Work will reportedly include refueling the ship's nuclear reactors, while work will be conducted on more than 2,300 components as well as the hundreds of tanks and systems.

Plans for the RCOH began in 2018 when HII's Newport News Shipbuilding received a \$187 million contract to begin engineering-pre-overhaul inspections. That included the material purchase and fabrication work that would be significant for the overhaul. Over the next five years, the flight deck will be removed, as well as most of the ship's computer and combat systems. The overhaul will also see the renovation of the tanks and other spaces, while the most significant part of the process is the refueling of the warship's two reactors. That is followed by a total reconstruction of USS John C. Stennis, giving the vessel a new lease on life.

The carrier will have some company at least into early next year, as another Nimitz-class aircraft carrier, USS George Washington (CVN-73), is also undergoing a similar conversion at the HII facility in Virginia. According to UPI, the two ships will be berthed side-by-side until work on the CVN-73 is completed. It had been planned to have USS George Washington back in service by late 2021, but the overhaul was delayed by the novel coronavirus pandemic. The yard and the U.S. Navy have agreed to prioritize work on existing ships and submarines, so the RCOH for CVN-74 could take longer than initially expected. HII is the nation's largest military shipbuilding company, and it currently employs more than 42,000 people worldwide, but its workforce has been stretched thin in recent years.

Due to delays with the new Ford-class of carriers, the U.S. Navy has been considering an extension to the service lives of the aging Nimitz-class carriers. Nicknamed "Johnny Reb," CVN-74 was commissioned in December 1995 and named in honor of Democratic Senator John C. Stennis of Mississippi, who hadn't lost an election in 60 years. The name, which was approved by then-President Ronald Reagan in 1988, has been the subject of controversy as Sen. Stennis was an outspoken critic of civil rights and racial equality. The nickname hasn't also drawn its share of criticism in recent years. However, it remains unlikely that the aircraft carrier would be renamed during its RCOH. [Source: Early Bird Brief | Peter Suci Karen | March 1, 2021 ++]

Coronavirus Vaccines

Update 31: Military May Revisit Making Mandatory after FDA Grants Approval

The Pentagon has not yet decided whether to require service members to get inoculated against COVID-19, once the Food and Drug Administration grants full approval for the vaccines. But in a briefing with reporters 1 MAR, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby indicated full FDA approval could change how the military's leadership looks at this issue. "Obviously, we're thinking about what happens when they become FDA-approved," Kirby said. "It would change the character of the decision-making process, about whether they could be mandatory or voluntary. But I don't want to get ahead of that process right now."

Despite the popular belief that the Pentagon can inject troops with anything it wants, military leaders are unable to force service members to get the COVID vaccinations at this time because the shots are approved only under an emergency-use authorization. Troops deploying to Iraq and Afghanistan were required to get a series of shots against anthrax, but that inoculation was fully approved by the FDA. Navy

leaders have already openly discussed their desire to make the vaccine mandatory. Last month, Vice Adm. Andrew Lewis, commander of the U.S. Second Fleet, told reporters that the Navy is "probably going to make it mandatory as soon as we can, just like we do with the flu vaccine." And the Navy has given ships the OK to relax strict coronavirus rules if all crew members get vaccinated, including eliminating weeks of pre-deployment quarantining, enforced social distancing, and restrictions on port calls and other breaks.

Nearly one-third of troops have turned down the vaccine, Pentagon officials told lawmakers last month, which has raised concerns. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin addressed some troops' reluctance to get the shots last week while touring a mass vaccination site in Los Angeles. He acknowledged that some Americans -- particularly minority Americans -- are hesitant to receive the vaccine because of past mistreatment by the medical community. In one particularly notorious case now known as the Tuskegee Experiment, doctors let syphilis go untreated in hundreds of Alabama Black men for decades while they studied the disease's effects. This legacy has, in some cases, left people wary of the medical establishment and new treatments like the COVID vaccine. "Because of some things that have happened in the past, there's a degree of mistrust, and I think we have to collectively work hard to dispel rumors and to provide facts to people," Austin said. "It's been my experience that when armed with the facts, people will tend to make the right decisions."

Kirby said a lot of factors go into whether someone chooses to get the vaccine, such as whether they have pre-existing conditions that would make vaccination risky. He said the Pentagon is administering the Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech two-dose vaccines almost as quickly as it gets them. So far, the military has acquired nearly 1,276,000 doses, and given almost 1,145,000 shots. About 735,000 of the shots were initial doses, and 409,000 were second doses. "They're not staying on the shelf very long," Kirby said. "We get them, and we put them into arms." The Pentagon will continue to make COVID vaccines available to troops who are most in need of them, including those getting ready to deploy, he said. And while getting vaccinated is a personal decision, Kirby said troops need to remember it's also a choice that could affect their teammates' health and unit readiness.

The newly approved Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which requires only one dose and can be kept at a standard refrigeration temperature, will give the Pentagon more flexibility to vaccinate more deployed and deploying troops. Kirby said the military will start receiving shipments of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine in the next week or so. While the military still doesn't require the vaccine for deploying troops, Kirby said it makes it available to them if they want it. "Part of our obligation here ... is to provide enough information so they can make the most informed decision," he said. "We certainly hope that people will see that these are safe and effective, and the side effects are minimal, and that their colleagues and teammates are vaccinating themselves."

When asked whether a deploying unit might decide to leave those who decline to be vaccinated behind, Kirby declined to speculate and said that would be the unit commander's decision. But he said he was not aware of any deploying units where this has been an issue. The Pentagon later said in an email to reporters that 4,843 active-duty service members are supporting FEMA's COVID vaccination centers, helping provide anywhere from 250 to 6,000 shots per day depending on the size of the center. Teams from across the military are already deployed to California, New Jersey, Texas, New York, and the Virgin Islands, and more will soon arrive at sites in Pennsylvania, Florida, Illinois and North Carolina. [Source: Military.com | Stephen Losey | March 1, 2021 ++]

USAF Flying Boxcar

AFSOC Wants Smaller One for Special Operations



Air Force Special Operations Command, headquartered at Hurlburt Field, could get a scaled-down version of an existing glider for "unspecified" U.S. operations, according to recent contract announcements. Outside of the formal contract announcements, though, AFSOC itself is indicating that it generally sees the glider as "a very efficient and flexible way to conduct stand-off airdrop resupply (getting supplies to troops without having to be directly over a target area)," according to an email responding to a Daily News query on the command's plans for the glider. Also according to the email, AFSOC sees the glider as an effective and efficient way to conduct "electronic warfare, intelligence, surveillance [and] reconnaissance" work, as well as "other non-kinetic battlefield effects (battlefield missions that don't involve explosives or other munitions)."

On 16 FEB, Yates Electrospace, a California-based firm that designs and builds electric-powered aircraft, announced that it had been awarded an Air Force contract for development of a scaled-down version of its autonomous Silent Arrow glider. The glider, designed for launching out of the back of larger aircraft such as the four-engine C-130 flown by AFSOC, comprises a wooden box with an aluminum frame that measures 2 feet tall, 2 feet wide and 8 feet long. The box, which can carry more than 1,600 pounds of cargo, is subsequently outfitted with an autopilot-equipped nosecone and a rear twin-tail assembly, according to a diagram on a website describing the craft and its capabilities.

As the Silent Arrow is pushed out of its host aircraft, four wings atop the box spring out to send the glider into flight. With a full payload launched from 25,000 feet, the Silent Arrow can glide for up to 40 miles. It's not clear exactly how much smaller the glider wanted by AFSOC will be in comparison with the full-size glider. But a news release announcing the contract award to Silent Arrow, which is part of Yates Electrospace, notes that it will be scaled down sufficiently to be deployed from the cargo ramp of the CV-22 Osprey twin tiltrotor aircraft operated by AFSOC. AFSOC also could deploy the smaller Silent Arrow from various helicopters, according to reports on the recent contract award.

The contract awarded to Silent Arrow for the scaled-down "flying box" is a Small Business Innovation Research contract. The SBIR program, coordinated by the federal Small Business Administration, is intended to help small businesses engaged in research and development contracts. Silent Arrow will do its work under the contract in partnership with the Air Force Research Laboratory, headquartered at Ohio's Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. Neither the news release nor other sources of information on the contract,

officially titled "Feasibility of Downsizing and Adapting Commercial Silent Arrow Cargo Delivery UAS (Unmanned Aerial System) to Meet Specific AFSOC Operational Requirements," indicated the dollar amount of the contract.

Funding for the work will come from AFWERX, an Air Force innovation program established in 2017 "to create transformative opportunities and foster a culture of innovation," according to its website. Yates Electrospace reportedly has sold almost two dozen of its larger Silent Arrow gliders to an unidentified European government-owned enterprise, according to Forbes.com, which noted that the company also has licensed production and sales to a United Kingdom company for production of another 40 of the larger gliders. In this country, according to Forbes.com, the Marine Corps has expressed interest in the larger Silent Arrow glider, but thus far there have been no orders from the U.S. military.

Looking ahead to its future with the scaled-down Silent Arrow, AFSOC noted in its 25 FEB email that the command is interested in seeing future demonstrations of the "aircraft-agnostic" glider, meaning that it is not limited to use with a single type of aircraft, because the glider "is expected to be able to be employed much more accurately and precisely" than current aerial delivery systems available to military forces. [Source: Northwest Florida Daily News | Jim Thompson | February 27, 202 ++]

Drone Defense

Update 02: THOR to Conduct Field Testing



The U.S. Army will conduct field-testing of a new microwave weapon designed to protect military bases from incoming drones as early as 2024, following an on-site demonstration at Kirtland Air Force Base in New Mexico, officials said. THOR, which stands for **Tactical High Power Operational Responder**, was built at Kirtland AFB and provides protection against multiple targets that simultaneously threaten military installations, the Albuquerque Journal reported.

Army Lt. Gen. L. Neil Thurgood said he watched the weapon's system on the base earlier this month and that the service's investment in microwave and laser weapons addresses a growing problem that requires new tools to defend troops and infrastructure. "The Army's directed-energy capabilities will need to provide a layered defense with multiple ways to defeat incoming threats," Thurgood said. "High-energy lasers kill one target at a time, and high-powered microwaves can kill groups or swarms, which is why we are pursuing a combination of both technologies."

Kelly Hammett, head of the Air Force Research Laboratory's Directed Energy Directorate that built THOR, said the Army plans to invest as a partner starting in October and begin field testing by 2024. It's unlikely the military will deploy the system before 2026. "They intend to procure enough systems for a platoon unit in 2024 to do experimentation with a mix of weapons," Hammett told the Albuquerque Journal. "They will put microwave and lasers together in a single unit to assess how to deploy it all."

The laboratory spent \$15 million to build THOR in cooperation with Albuquerque-based engineering firm Verus Research as well as BAE Systems and Leidos. It first demonstrated the system in 2019. Program manager Amber Anderson previously said the system works like a flashlight, using a wave that spreads out to disable anything within its electromagnetic cone. "The system output is powerful radio bursts, which offer a greater engagement range than bullets or nets, and its effects are silent and instantaneous," Anderson said. [Source: The Associated Press | February 24, 2021 ++]

Army Infantry Squad Vehicle

New One Being Tested In Arizona



A new vehicle that the U.S. Army is acquiring to provide infantry soldiers with battlefield mobility is being tested in the Yuma Proving Ground's harsh desert terrain in southwestern Arizona. Largely based on a midsize Chevrolet pickup, the Infantry Squad Vehicle is intended to carry an infantry squad's nine soldiers and their equipment, the Yuma Sun reported. Testing began in early February with a goal of finishing by April, said Isaac Rodriguez, team leader for the proving ground's combat automotive division. "Before the soldier ever touches the vehicle, we want to make sure that it is safe for them to use," Rodriguez told the Yuma Sun. Along with operating one of nine prototypes over 5,000 miles of desert terrain at the proving ground, "we will also be doing some slope mobility and cooling system tests," he said.

The vehicle will be built under a \$214.3 million contract awarded to a subsidiary, GM Defense LLC, in June. The company said in December it was renovating a facility in Concord, North Carolina, to support production of the vehicle. The facility is expected to begin delivering production vehicles in April. The Army plans to furnish the vehicles to infantry brigade combat teams that now don't have vehicles for transporting their frontline foot soldiers. Having soldiers ride in a vehicle with their equipment instead of carrying it across many miles of cross-country terrain to their destination means they'll be much less fatigued and better able to carry out their missions, said Steven Herrick, the Army's product lead for ground mobility vehicles within the Program Executive Office Combat Support and Combat Service Support.

"It has always been coined as a better boot," Herrick said. "It is a mode of transportation that effectively changes the game on how soldiers deploy and get to their objectives." The unarmored vehicle will be light enough to be sling loaded under a UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter and small enough to fit inside a CH-47 Chinook helicopter. A cargo plane could also deliver the vehicle with a low-altitude airdrop. A Pentagon assessment said the vehicle will provide infantry soldiers with valuable off-road mobility and "to be less predictable in their movement" but is cramped and lacks convenient storage space for a squad's nine soldiers and their equipment. The assessment by the Defense Department's test and evaluation office was first reported by the Task & Purpose military news website.

The vehicle is based on the frame of the 2020 Chevrolet Colorado ZR2 midsize truck, and Herrick said 90% of its parts are commercial off-the-shelf components. The initial contract is for production of 649 vehicles by the end of the 2024 fiscal year, but the Army plans a total of 2,065. The 1st Infantry Brigade Combat Team of the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, N.C., is slated to receive the first 59 vehicles later this year. Eventually, 11 infantry brigade combat teams will be outfitted with 59 vehicles each under the first contract. [Source: Associated Press | February 27, 2021++]

Army Drones

Update 04: FTUAS: Army Blown Away By New Drones (In Rain)



L3 Harris FVR-90 & Martin UAS V-BATs

All four drones at a Future Tactical UAS rodeo made a powerful impression on attending Army officers and troops, even when rain swept in that would've grounded the current RQ-7 Shadow drone. "Hello from cold, wet, and dreary Fort Benning", said Brig. Gen. Walter Rugen, director of Future Vertical Lift at Army Futures Command. "Shadow could never fly in this type of moisture, couldn't even come close," he told reporters. But all four vendors – the Martin V-BAT, Arcturus Jump 20, L3 Harris FVR-90, and Textron/AAI Aerosonde HQ – successfully made vertical launches (Shadow needs a runway), then switched to horizontal flight for their missions, and returned to base safely.

More important, arguably, than the generals' impressions: "We saw the soldiers uniformly fall in love with this capability and want to keep it," Rugen said. Those soldiers had plenty of time to fall in love. The VIP demonstration was the "culmination" of nearly a year of hands-on experience with all four types of drones across five operational brigades, emphasized Maj. Gen. David Francis, head of the Army's Aviation Center at Fort Rucker. The goal: test off-the-shelf technology to educate the Army on potential

replacements for its aging, noisy and runway-bound Shadow drones. “The Shadow is a 30-year-old system and the technology has transformed incredibly,” Francis said. He and his fellow Army aviators outlined some of the new drones’ advantages:

- Vertical take off and landing makes the drone much more flexible and eliminates the manpower and equipment required to set up and maintain a landing strip. A team of two or three soldiers can get one of these new drones in the air in a matter of minutes, officers said. One operator, Specialist Anthony Karl, even told reporters that his team was able to pack up their drones and their kit every night and set it up anew the next morning, a major tactical advantage, something Shadow couldn’t match.
- All four drones were also able to conduct that vertical take off and the switch to level flight using autonomous software, without a human having to manage the process by remote control. However, the soldiers using the V-BAT – a unique “tail-sitter” design – did end up physically grabbing it to stabilize it during takeoff and landing.
- All four drones were, in fact, autonomous enough that they could be operated from inside a moving vehicle – typically a Humvee or FMTV truck – which isn’t possible with older drones that require human hands constantly on the remote controls. Instead, the human operators just set waypoints for the drones to fly to, with considerable capability to customize and vary routes – a major aid in avoiding enemy anti-aircraft defenses.
- All four were also compact enough that they could be packed up, with support crew and equipment, for transport aboard the Army’s standard heavy-lift helicopter, the CH-47 Chinook; there are reports one could even fit inside the much smaller UH-60 Black Hawk.
- All four drones were weatherized against humidity and rain; Shadow is not, Spec. Karl said. That said, he cautioned, bad weather still limited what their sensors could see, so the drones’ operations were limited even when they could physically fly.
- In terms of sensor options, all four drones can use much more modern, compact, and powerful payload packages than what’s available for Shadow – a real “leap ahead,” said Rugen.
- All four are technically simpler to operate and maintain. The pre-flight checklist, for instance, drops from more than 150 items to under 70, said Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Crosby, a senior Army Futures Command advisor.
- All four drones are also much quieter than Shadow. That’s more convenient for the crew, who no longer have to shout checklist items over the roaring engine. And it’s much stealthier. While the drones are easy to hear during take-off and landing, Spec. Karl said, they become inaudible from the ground once they reach altitude. (This is a characteristic they share with the V-22, a famously loud aircraft as it takes off that is almost whisper quiet when it flies and swoops in for a landing.)

What’s the Army’s next step? It will analyze the data and soldiers’ recommendations, submit them to the Army Requirements Oversight Council, and have the AROC finalize a formal requirement for the Shadow replacement. That should happen within “weeks,” Rugen said. The Army’s plan to buy the Shadow replacement is still in flux, said Brig. Gen. Robert Barrie, Program Executive Officer for Aviation. But the Army will hold a competition open to all comers, he emphasized; the four drones field-tested over the past year won’t get any special consideration, he said, although they’ve certainly benefited from such close feedback from the Army.

The service sees the Future Tactical Unmanned Aerial System (FTUAS) not only as a replacement for the Shadow, but as an agile eye-in-the-sky connected to a whole digital “ecosystem” of data-sharing, deep-striking Future Vertical Lift aircraft. Having its own low-altitude air force, uniquely able to fly under radar and take cover behind hills, is a big part of what the Army envisions as its contribution to future All-Domain Operations. [Source: Breaking Defense | Sydney J. Freedberg Jr. | March 02, 2021 ++]

Navy’s Rust Pandemic

Surface Fleet Is Turning Into a Floating Ad for Rust-Oleum



USS James E. Williams, USS Fort McHenry, and USS Stout

The Navy’s surface ships are so covered in rust that they look prematurely aged and unseaworthy, which isn’t exactly the message the U.S. wants to send China and Russia. When the destroyer USS Stout returned from its unprecedented 215-day deployment in October, there was no way to hide how much of the ship was covered in rust. The vessel looked as if it should have been renamed USS Tetanus. “We have become the worst-looking Navy in the world — with no competition,” said longtime naval journalist and commentator Chris Cavas.

Cavas recently re-tweeted a picture showing the destroyer USS James E. Williams with skid marks of running rust as it pulled into Naval Station Mayport, Florida, on 27 FEB. The ship deployed in January to the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific on counter-narcotics and other missions. The Navy takes preventative maintenance very seriously, but the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has limited port visits, which is where ships normally get painted, said Cmdr. Richlyn Ivey, a spokeswoman for Naval Surface Force Atlantic.

But the issue of the Navy’s rusting surface ships pre-dates the COVID-19 pandemic. Cavas has been documenting the Navy’s rust pandemic for a while. In August 2019, he tweeted a picture of the dock landing ship USS Fort McHenry looking as if it had not been painted in years. One reason why Navy ships look so beat up is they are made of alloys that are designed to rust on the surface while protecting the metal underneath from further corrosion, said retired Navy Cmdr. Bryan Clark, a senior fellow with the Hudson Institute think tank in Washington, D.C. “That surface rust can just be scraped off and you’re good as new — but it looks terrible,” Clark said.

Clark acknowledged that ships from other countries do not look nearly so worn and torn, but he said that is because they do not deploy nearly as often as Navy ships, which are constantly underway or preparing for upcoming deployments. For the USS Stout, being at sea for so long without any port calls meant the ship’s crew could only do limited maintenance on the vessel, as veteran Defense News reporter David Larter told The War Zone in October 2020. “These long deployments and 208-day underways are going to take a toll on these ships inside and out,” Larter said. “It’s honestly impressive they kept a quarter-century

old ship in running form that long! But the Navy will have to pay the piper. This is unsustainable.” There does not seem to be any letup in the near-term for the constant demand for Navy surface ships around the world, despite two separate ship collisions in 2017 that involved the USS John S. McCain and the USS Fitzgerald, costing the lives of 17 sailors in total.

“When you look at a ship from a European navy or the Chinese navy, for example, they will make that ship pristine before it deploys,” Clark said. “It will deploy for a relatively short time and then come home — and then not deploy again for some number of years until it has to go out again.” Clark also pointed out that when rust develops on the side of a ship, it requires the vessel to pull into port so sailors can paint it. But Cavas said he does not believe the Navy’s rust problem has anything to do with technology or constant deployments. For some reason, some Navy commands have not put a high priority on ensuring that their vessels are ship-shape, said Cavas, who noted that rust degrades equipment and causes other problems. “There are many ships where — for whatever reason — they’re just not be taken care of the way that we know they should be taken care of,” Cavas said. [Source: Task & Purpose | Jeff Schogol | March 02, 2021 ++]

Air Force Uniforms

Update 02: Wave of Changes Approved

The Air Force has authorized a slew of new uniform changes — including allowing maintainers to wear shorts during warm weather across the entire force. “These options came directly from feedback from the field through the virtual uniform board and feedback from commands in the field,” Lt. Gen. Brian Kelly, Air Force deputy chief of staff for manpower, personnel, and services, said in an Air Force news release. “We appreciated the feedback we received from airmen and the opportunity to hear their concerns and ideas,” Kelly said. “Not all of the ideas fit within our standards or culture, but many do and provided us an opportunity to provide options for our airmen.”

According to modifications coming to Air Force Instruction 36-2903, commanders of maintainers have the authority to allow them to wear dark navy blue shorts instead of the Airman Battle Uniform or Operational Camouflage Pattern trousers when temperatures are expected to meet or exceed 80 degrees Fahrenheit. These shorts may be worn in areas such as the flight line, hangars and dock areas where the temperature cannot be controlled, the service said. The shorts would be paired with a coyote brown T-shirt and uniform green or coyote brown socks with uniform boots. Several Air Force installations, including Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada, have paved the way on this issue, and have previously allowed their maintainers to wear shorts.

Across the entire Air Force and Space Force, airmen and guardians will be allowed to wear duty identifier patches that are no more than five letters and fall within the spice brown color scheme. Socks that are solid black, white, navy blue, gray, desert sand, tan, Defense Logistics Agency-issued green or coyote brown and have only small trademark logos are also permitted with physical training gear. Additionally, the Air Force has given the green light for eyeglasses and sunglasses with frames that are black, brown, white, navy blue, gray or transparent material, or gold or silver wire. Likewise, airmen and guardians are allowed to carry messenger and lunch bags — so long as they are black, brown, gray or navy

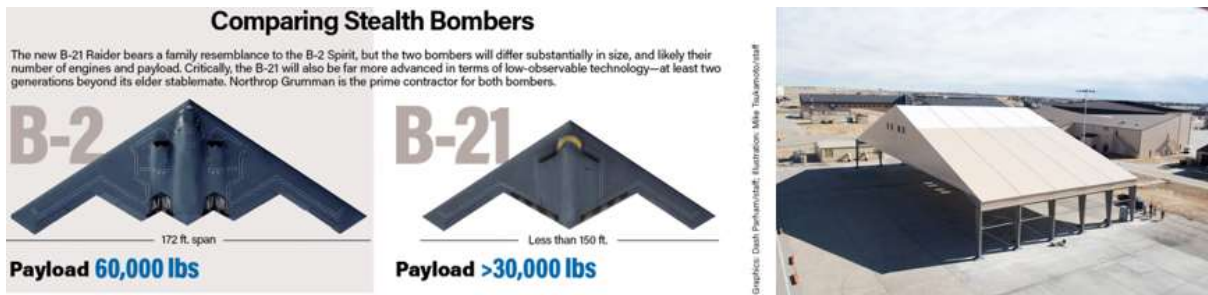
blue and do not feature designs outside of the ABU and OCP patterns. And finally, the fleece cap and/or gloves may be worn without an outer garment.

The changes are slated to take effect on 15 MAR. Separately, the Air Force announced 2 MAR that it had signed off on new designs for an Air Force Physical Training Gear uniform. The designs for the PT jacket, T-shirt, shorts and pants will become available to airmen in 2022. [Source: AirForceTimes | Diana Stancy Correll | March 3, 2021 ++]

Air Force B-21

Bomber Shelter May Reveal Size of Secret Jet

The Air Force has erected a prototype temporary shelter for the B-21 bomber at Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D.; one of a number being evaluated for use at B-21 bases, depots, and potentially at forward deployment sites. An image released with a press release about the shelter, however, may also divulge the dimensions of the aircraft, which have never been revealed. The image shows the temporary shelter on the tarmac at Ellsworth. Adjacent to the shelter is a vehicle in the class of a Ford F-150 or Chevy Silverado, both of which are about 20 feet long. Comparing the truck to the grid of concrete sections on the tarmac, also about 20 feet square, indicates the shelter is about 150 feet long and 80 feet deep. The Air Force indicated in its press release that the shelter is meant to cover the entire airplane.



By comparison, the B-2 bomber has a wingspan of 172 feet and a length of about 70 feet. Temporary, deployable, inflatable shelters for that aircraft measure 250 feet by 126 feet, indicating the potential margin required around the edges. Based on these dimensions, the B-21's wingspan could be about 140 feet, if its wing sweep corresponds to that of the B-2, and having a length of about 50 feet. Air Force Magazine has previously estimated the size of the B-21 as having a wingspan of no more than 150 feet and a length of 55 feet. The Air Force could not immediately comment on the size of the shelter. The shelters would permit easier work on the bombers outside hangars, to protect them from the elements, and to get them in the air faster at need.

The structures are intended to help extend the life of the B-21 by limiting ultraviolet exposure from the sun, limiting snow accumulation and melt, and reducing de-icing operations "over time," Col. Derek Oakley, Air Force Global Strike Command's B-21 Integration and System Management Office director, said in a press release. The shelters "also help us generate sorties more quickly by eliminating the need to always have to move aircraft in and out of hangars." Major maintenance operations, however, "will still be performed indoors in hangars, but the B-21 Raider design will also provide us the flexibility to perform routine maintenance right on the flightline," he said.

The shelter built at Ellsworth is an open-air affair with a peaked roof; more akin to a sunshade than a hangar. Oakley said several designs will be considered, and “we will collect a few years of data on the shelters and then incorporate those data into the final Environmental Protection Shelter design.” The B-21 will likely be based at Ellsworth, Whiteman Air Force Base, Mo., and Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, but Ellsworth was chosen as the shelter test site because it has the most “extreme and diverse” weather conditions of the three. Each B-2 Spirit bomber has its own hangar at Whiteman, and the Air Force has a number of inflatable, closable shelters designed for it, used in deployments to places like Diego Garcia and Guam, so the B-2’s temperature-sensitive low observable treatments can be cured on deployment if necessary. Since the B-21 is somewhat smaller than the B-2, those shelters will likely also be usable by the B-21.

The Air Force’s Rapid Capabilities Office Director Randall G. Walden told Air Force Magazine in a recent interview that bomber maintainers and technicians have been included in all aspects of the B-21’s design and development phase, to ensure the jet is easy to maintain in operational service. “Throughout the engineering and manufacturing development phase, sustainment and maintenance personnel have been integrated into every design decision we make to ensure technical solutions do not inadvertently result in sub-optimal outcomes once the weapon system is fielded,” said Col. Jason Voorheis, B-21 system program director and acquisition lead. Sustainability and maintainability requirements have been “at the forefront throughout the design and development phase” of the B-21, he said in a press release.

Ellsworth recently held an industry day to solicit interest in building other B-21-specific facilities on the base, such as a General Maintenance and a Low-Observable Maintenance hangar. While Dyess, Ellsworth, and Whiteman are the preferred main operating bases for the B-21, they will not be formally designated as B-21 bases until this summer, with the conclusion of environmental impact studies. No additional impact is expected, because all three bases now host USAF bombers. Ellsworth is the preferred location for the first B-21 squadron, with Dyess the second preference. The Air Force is already retiring some of the B-1 bombers now based at these locations. [Source: Air force Magazine | John A. Tirpak | March 3, 2021 ++]

USSF Insignia

Space Force wants Enlisted to Help Determine Their Rank Insignia



So now that the great name debate is over, Space Force wants its enlisted guardians to help determine how their rank insignia will look. To that end, the military’s newest service on 2 MAR launched a survey complete with four choices of insignia for ranks from E-2 to E-9. “We are conducting a scientifically designed survey to capture Guardian feedback on proposed enlisted insignia designs,” Lynn Kirby, Space Force spokesperson, told Air Force Times in an email. “We released the survey March 2. Members have the next few weeks to respond to their unique invitation to participate, and the results of the survey will inform the next steps toward finalizing insignia designs.” Only guardians who already transferred and those pending transfers received unique invitations to participate, Kirby said.

The new designs were first made public by the Air Force amn/nco/snco Facebook page on 4 MAR. One version of the proposed enlisted rank insignia mirrors the current Air Force design, but with a twist. The star is replaced by the Space Force emblem. Another version resembles Army and Marine Corps enlisted insignia, with upward-pointing chevrons, but with the Space Force emblem at the bottom of the design. A third mirrors that, only with downward pointing chevrons while a fourth option resembles Navy enlisted rank insignia, with slashes for E-2 and E-3 and downward pointing chevrons and the Space Force emblem replacing the eagle for the rest.

After much public debate over what to call its troops, Space Force spelled out what its rank structure will be as of 1 FEB in a memo signed 29 JAN. But those who advocated for the Space Force to adopt a rank structure patterned after the Navy — most notably Captain Kirk himself, Star Trek actor William Shatner, on this very website — or something even more fanciful and space-faring will be sorely disappointed. With a few exceptions, the Space Force’s rank structure closely resembles the Air Force from which it derived. The officer rank structure for Space Force guardians, as they are now known, will be the same as that used by the Air Force, Army and Marine Corps, ranging from second lieutenants to four-star generals. [Source: AirForceTimes | Howard Altman | March 4, 2021 ++]

Navy Terminology, Jargon & Slang

‘Shit In It’ thru ‘Sierra Hotel’

Every profession has its own jargon and the Navy is no exception. Since days of yore the military in general, and sailors in particular, have often had a rather pithy (dare say ‘tasteless’?) manner of speech. That may be changing somewhat in these politically correct times, but to Bowdlerize the sailor’s language represented here would be to deny its rich history. The traditions and origins remain. While it attempted to present things with a bit of humor, if you are easily offended this may not be for you. You have been warned.

Note: 'RN' denotes Royal Navy usage. Similarly, RCN = Royal Canadian Navy, RAN = Royal Australian Navy, RM = Royal Marines, RNZN = Royal New Zealand Navy, UK = general usage in militaries of the former British Empire

Shit In It – (UK) Leave it alone.

Shitfaced – (1) Drunk. (2) (UK) Angry.

Shitters – (1) (UK) Just about anything, but especially any liquids or chemicals, used in cleaning the head. (2) The toilets, as opposed to the Pissers (urinals).

Shitting – Lying to, or attempting to con, someone. "Are you shitting me?"

Shonky – (RNZN) Not particularly well; not well rehearsed, not familiar with.

Shooter – (1) The catapult officer. The one who directs the firing of the catapult. (2) A unit (aircraft or ship) that is launching, or is about to launch, ordnance.

Short - (or short-timer) Someone whose rotation or transfer date is rapidly approaching. Can lead to usage of the term 'FIGMO.'

Short-Arm Inspection – VD check. The sailors lined up after a port call and the doc took a look. Really.

Short Timer – One whose enlistment is nearly up.

Short-Timer's Chain - A length of chain carried by a short-timer, where the number of links equals the number of days remaining before discharge. Each day, the short-timer cuts off another link.

Shot –

(1) (Artillery) A radio call that a round has been fired. See also SPLASH.

(2) A unit of measure for anchor chain. In this usage, a shot is 15 fathoms (90 feet).

(3) (archaic) A unit of measure equaling a league (3 nautical miles). This appears to be the origin of the convention that a country's territorial waters extend 3 miles out from its shores—a country was able to claim what it could control with its guns. That is probably also the origin of the term itself—"gunshot" or "cannon shot" became simply "shot."

Shot Line – The line fired from a line throwing gun; used to put lines over for UNREP or when coming alongside the pier. The shot line is small-diameter line to which successively heavier lines are attached so that they may be hauled over to the receiving ship or pier.

Show a Leg – The traditional call made at reveille, it originated in the days of sail when women were let aboard ship. At reveille, a woman in her hammock would display a leg and thereby was not required to turn out.

Side Number - Numbers painted on the nose of an aircraft to serialize it as to type and squadron. 1XX and 2XX are fighters. 3XX and 4XX are attack aircraft. 5XX is the EW (EA-6 Prowler) detachment, 6XX is the E-2 Hawkeye detachment, and 7XX is the ASW (Viking) squadron.

Sierra Hotel - From the phonetic alphabet for SH, the polite form of 'Shit Hot'. Excellent, aggressive, skilled, etc. "Man, that was a sierra hotel takeoff."

[Source: <http://hazegray.org/faq/slang1.htm> | March 15, 2021 ++]

* Military History *



Military History Anniversaries **16 thru 31 MAR**

Significant events in U. S. Military History over the next 15 days are listed in the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “**Military History Anniversaries 16 thru 31 MAR**”. [Source: This Day in History www.history.com/this-day-in-history | March 2021 ++]

Fukushima Nuclear Disaster **Second-Worst in History**



On March 11, 2011, the largest earthquake ever recorded in Japan causes massive devastation, and the ensuing tsunami decimates the Tōhoku region of northeastern Honshu. On top of the already-horrific destruction and loss of life, the natural disaster also gave rise to a nuclear disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant. The Fukushima disaster is considered the second-worst nuclear disaster in history, forcing the relocation of over 100,000 people.

On detecting the earthquake, the active reactors automatically shut down their normal power-generating fission reactions. Because of these shut downs and other electrical grid supply problems, the reactors' electricity supplies failed, and their emergency diesel generators automatically started. Critically, these were required to provide electrical power to the pumps that circulated coolant through the reactors' cores. This continued circulation is vital in order to remove residual decay heat, which continues to be produced after fission has ceased. However, the earthquake had also generated a 46 foot high tsunami that arrived shortly afterwards and swept over the plant's seawall and then flooded the lower parts of reactors 1–4. This caused the failure of the emergency generators and loss of power to the circulating pumps.

The resultant loss of reactor core cooling led to three nuclear meltdowns, three hydrogen explosions, and the release of radioactive contamination in Units 1, 2 and 3 between 12 and 15 March. The spent fuel pool of previously shut-down Reactor 4 increased in temperature on 15 MAR due to decay heat from newly added spent fuel rods, but did not boil down sufficiently to expose the fuel. Large amounts of water contaminated with radioactive isotopes were released into the Pacific Ocean during and after the disaster. In the days after the accident, radiation released to the atmosphere forced the government to declare an ever-larger evacuation zone around the plant, culminating in an evacuation zone with a 20 km radius.

The full extent of the fallout became apparent over the ensuing months, with the government eventually evacuating all residents within a 30km radius of the plant due to the rising off-site levels of ambient ionizing radiation caused by airborne radioactive contamination from the damaged reactors. No deaths were initially attributed to the incident, although this was of little comfort to the 154,000 who were

evacuated or the loved ones of the more than 18,000 people who lost their lives as a result of the earthquake and tsunami. Some have suggested that such a large evacuation was not necessary, as radiation levels appear to have dropped below what was expected in the immediate wake of the accident.

Though many were able to return to their homes, a 371-square-kilometer “difficult-to-return zone” remains evacuated as of 2021, and the true toll may not be known for decades. In 2018, the government announced that former plant worker who had served during the meltdown was the first death officially attributed to radiation from the disaster, which today is considered second only to Chernobyl in the ranking of infamous nuclear incidents. [Source: This Day in History | March 11, 2021 ++]

Legends of WWII

Norman Gibbs | Waist Gunner



Former U.S. Army Air Corps Norman Gibbs in WWII was assigned as a B-17 bomber right waist gunner who had to bail out and survived as a POW at age 18. Now at age 95, you can listen to him recount his experiences of the war in a 58 min video at <https://youtu.be/QHYbR6VwKA0>. [Source: Legends of WWII | October 5, 2020 ++]

Every Picture Tells A Story

WWI Harlem Hellfighters



Soldiers of the 369th Infantry Regiment, commonly referred to as the Harlem Hellfighters, shortly after being awarded the Croix de Guerre for gallantry in action during World War I. The Harlem Hellfighters were the most celebrated African-American regiment in World War I. Even so, they faced immense racism and throughout their service and even while they prepared to travel to the front lines of Europe to fight for Democracy. During World War I, the 369th Infantry Regiment battled harder and longer against Germany than any other Allied military presence. Like the African American soldiers of the Civil War, the Harlem Hellfighters were fighting for a country that didn't even want to give them rights. Musician Noble Sissle, a Hellfighter, wrote about the group's time in Europe, saying: "There had been all kind of insults hurled at our body who were on duty in town. Our boys had some pretty bitter pills to swallow."

WWII Bomber Nose Art

[71] Desperate Journey



Medal of Honor Awardees

Robert Jenkins | Vietnam



The President of the United States takes pride in posthumously presenting the

MEDAL OF HONOR

To

PFC Robert Jenkins Jr

**Organization: U.S. Marine Corps, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion,
3d Marine Division (rein) FMF**

Place and date: March 5, 1969 Fire Support Base Argonne, DMZ, Republic of Vietnam

Entered service: Feb. 2, 1968

Born: June 1, 1948, in Interlachen, Florida



Many of the service members who gave their lives in service to our country barely had a chance to begin their own. Marine Corps Private 1st Class Robert Jenkins Jr. falls into that category. What he lacked in age, he more than made up for in courage, commitment and dedication. For that, he earned the Medal of Honor.

Jenkins was born June 1, 1948, in Interlachen, Florida, just east of Gainesville. He had a brother and three sisters and graduated from Palatka Central Academy, an all-Black high school, in 1967. Jenkins' family and friends said he was a nice teen who got good grades, had a lot of friends and worked hard for his family, according to the Florida Department of Military Affairs. He had a talent for masonry and woodworking, but he was also looking forward to a career in the Marine Corps. His mother said during a 1996 Tampa Tribune interview that he wanted to volunteer instead of being drafted. Jenkins enlisted on Feb. 2, 1968, as the war in Vietnam was raging. Within five months, he was deployed to the Southeast Asian country. Attached to the 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion, 3rd Marine Division, Jenkins initially served as a scout and driver.

During the several months that he was in Vietnam, a lot of defensive battles broke out for control of U.S. Marine fire control support bases on or near the demilitarized zone, which split the north from the south. So, he was eventually assigned as a machine gunner with the battalion's Company C. Early on the morning of March 5, 1969, Jenkins' 12-man reconnaissance team was prepared to defend Fire Support Base Argonne, just south of the DMZ, from an impending attack. When it came, a North Vietnamese Army platoon started bombarding them with fire from automatic weapons, mortars and grenades. Jenkins and another private first class, Fred Ostrom, were fighting off the enemy together in a ditch when a North Vietnamese soldier threw a hand grenade at them. Jenkins immediately pushed Ostrom to the ground and jumped on top of him to shield him from the blast.

Ostrom survived. Jenkins did not. He was a few months shy of his 21st birthday. "He saved more than my life — I have two kids," Ostrom said in a November 1996 interview with the Tampa Tribune. U.S. helicopters eventually arrived at the scene to keep the North Vietnamese at bay long enough for the Marines to be airlifted out. Two other men in Jenkins' units were killed in the firefight. Six were wounded, including Ostrom. Ostrom said that, while he only knew Jenkins for a few months, the young Marine left an indelible mark on his life. "He was someone I could trust, someone I could count on," Ostrom told the Tampa Tribune. "What happened was in Robert's character. If it hadn't been me, it would have been someone else [he saved]. I am proud of him and I miss him."

The valor, courage and selflessness it requires to give your life for another was not overlooked the day of his death. Jenkins received a posthumous recommendation for the Medal of Honor. On April 20, 1970, his family accepted it on his behalf from Vice President Spiro Agnew during a White House ceremony. When Jenkins' body was returned home, his family decided that he would be buried in Sister Spring Baptist Cemetery in his hometown.

In the decades since Jenkins' death, Interlachen has made a concerted effort to remember his sacrifices. Jenkins' high school was integrated in the 1970s and has since been renamed Robert Jenkins Middle School. The Robert H. Jenkins Jr. Memorial Park was built during the same decade, and a post office was eventually named in his honor. But the biggest tribute may have been from Ostrom, the man Jenkins saved. When Ostrom first visited Jenkins' grave in 1995, he told the Tampa Bay Times that the plot was in disarray and not befitting a hero. So, he spent a year working with veterans organizations and Jenkins' family to get it cleaned up. By Veterans Day of 1996, a rededication ceremony was held for Jenkins, complete with a Medal of Honor headstone and a footstone donated by several veterans' groups. [Source: DOD News & <https://www.cmohs.org> | Katie Lange | January 18, 2021 ++]

WWII Bomb Disposal

Glasgow Scotland Mar. 12, 1941



Police and Army bomb disposal officers with a defused German 1000kg 'Luftmine' (parachute mine) in Glasgow, 18 March 1941



Prescription Drug Costs

Update 68: Biden Freeze Hits Two Trump Drug Price Rules

A freeze by the new Biden administration on Trump-era regulations will hit at least two rules aimed at lowering drug prices, including one dealing with insulin and EpiPens for under-served patients. The halt follows a memo last month from White House chief of staff Ron Klain directing agencies to halt new and pending regulations from going into effect to ensure Biden officials have the opportunity to review them. The Department of Health and Human Services issued a flurry of regulations that sought to address high drug prices, one of Americans' chief health care complaints, in the waning days of former President Donald Trump's term. They stemmed from a set of executive orders Trump signed in July and September.

Drug rebates

The Department of Health and Human Services on 29 JAN agreed to push back the implementation of a controversial rebate rule until 2023. The regulation would effectively ban drug makers from providing rebates to pharmacy benefit managers and insurers -- a radical change in the way many drugs are priced and paid for in Medicare and Medicaid. Instead, drug companies will be encouraged to pass the discounts directly to patients at the pharmacy counter. The Trump administration had backed down from issuing this rule in 2019 after it was found to raise costs for seniors and the federal government, but issued the final rule in November.

The Pharmaceutical Care Management Association, which represents pharmacy benefit managers, sued the Trump administration to stop implementation of the rule. The group, along with America's Health Insurance Plans, argue that it would benefit drug manufacturers. A federal judge put the case on hold pending a review by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Insulin and EpiPens

The agency is also freezing a Trump rule requiring Federally Qualified Health Centers, which provide primary care services to underserved communities, to pass along discounts they receive on insulin and EpiPens to their patients. The rule only affects medications these centers purchased through the 340B drug discount program, not the prices of these drugs for the general public. Trump officials said the rule would increase access to these medications among the 28 million people who visit the centers annually, over 6 million of whom are uninsured. The rule was to have taken effect on January 22 but was delayed to March 22 to give Biden's health officials time to review it and consider new regulations.

Community health centers opposed the rule, saying it would backfire and make it harder for them to provide these medications, particularly during the pandemic. They already offer sliding fee discounts to low-income patients, according to the National Association of Community Health Centers, an industry group.

Biden's drug-price goals

Reducing the cost of prescription medications is one of Biden's top health care priorities. He supports allowing Medicare to negotiate drug prices and consumers to import medicine from abroad. It remains to be seen what the President's health officials will do with the two Trump-era rules related to these provisions. The Department of Health and Human Services issued in a final rule in late September establishing a path for states and certain other entities to set up drug importation programs. In late November, the agency issued to a final rule that calls for Medicare to pay the same price for certain expensive prescription drugs as other developed nations, a "most-favored-nation price."

Other nations typically pay far less for medications, in large part because their governments often determine the cost -- which runs counter to Republicans' allegiance to the free market system. Federal courts temporarily halted implementation of the rule after multiple industry groups filed lawsuits. [Source: CNN | Tami Luhby | February 1, 2021 ++]

Prescription Drug Costs

Update 69: Democrats Plan Crackdown on Rising Drug Costs

Democrats are hoping 2021 will be the year they accomplish their long-held goal of reining in rising prescription drug costs by allowing the government to negotiate directly with pharmaceutical companies. The proposal is largely opposed by Republicans and loathed by the pharmaceutical industry, but Democrats think they have a chance of getting it done with control of the White House and Congress. Price negotiations could be included later this year in a reconciliation bill, a fast-track budgetary move that only needs 51 votes to pass the Senate and can't be filibustered.

The party is already using reconciliation to move President Biden's COVID-19 relief measure through Congress while sidestepping a GOP filibuster. The new effort could be part of a second package later this year. "I think, first of all, we should get as much done through reconciliation as we can," said Sen. Tim Kaine (D-VA), who introduced a bill with Sen. Michael Bennet (D-C) in FEB that would establish a public option health insurance plan and allow Medicare to negotiate lower drug prices. "We'll do our very, very best to get as much of it as we can, with the Biden team, in bill two," Kaine said, referring to the second reconciliation bill that Democrats hope to pass later this year.

Public anger over the rising costs of insulin and other life-saving drugs has grown in recent years, but Congress has not been able to accomplish significant legislative reform to the convoluted drug pricing system. While a bipartisan proposal from Sens. Chuck Grassley (R-IA) and Ron Wyden (D-OR) gained support in the Senate last year, Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY), who at that point was majority leader, refused to bring the bill to the floor in an election year. Now with full control of the government are hoping to go much bigger than the Grassley-Wyden bill, which would limit out-of-pocket costs for seniors and cap price increases to the rate of inflation, but not allow government price negotiation. "It just defies common sense to not let the government do that," Wyden recently told reporters.

The proposal would upend the pharmaceutical industry, which has spent billions of dollars over the past several years on lobbying and campaign contributions. "Do I think this will be easy? No. Pharma will fight anything that curbs its unilateral power to set prices on brand name drugs," said David Mitchell, co-founder of Patients for Affordable Drugs. "But I think we are looking at the best environment we have seen in many,

many years for the enactment of meaningful reform to lower drug prices.” Democrats are likely to return to some version of H.R. 3, a bill that passed the House last year with the support of every single member of the caucus but received few votes from Republicans. It did not receive consideration from any Senate committee or a vote on the Senate floor.

The main component of that bill has been pushed by Democrats for decades. It would allow the government to negotiate with pharmaceutical companies for lower prices on drugs covered by Medicare, the federal health program for seniors. Drug companies would have to then extend those prices to private insurers. It would completely change the way the U.S. pays for drugs, saving the federal government more than \$456 billion over 10 years, according to an analysis by the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO). It would also lead to 40 fewer new drugs coming to the market in the U.S. over the next two decades, according to the CBO estimate. Democrats arguing for the change point to rising costs of brand-name drugs and insurance plans that increasingly require patients pay more money toward their own care, forcing them to ration insulin and other drugs. They also note that H.R. 3 includes \$10 billion for biomedical research.

Reconciliation is a tricky process that Democrats used in 2010 to pass changes to the Affordable Care Act and Republicans used to pass their tax-cut bill in 2017. The legislation must meet strict rules or risk being thrown out by the nonpartisan Senate parliamentarian, though Kaine said he thinks his bill can pass muster. Democrats must also contend with differences within the caucus. While Democrats broadly agree on allowing Medicare to negotiate for lower drug prices, negotiations over the scope of H.R. 3 took about a year, with moderate and progressive members butting heads. The bill that eventually passed authorized the government to negotiate the prices of between 50 and 250 drugs per year. Progressives questioned why there should be a maximum number of negotiated drugs at all and signaled they will carry that fight into this year. “In this moment of a pandemic, it is more important than ever that we have the strongest possible drug pricing bill passed by the House, the Senate and the White House, and we are definitely going to use HR 3 as a baseline,” said Rep. Pramila Jayapal (D-WA), chairwoman of the Congressional Progressive Caucus.

A list of policy recommendations agreed to by Biden and Sen. Bernie Sanders’s (I-VT) “unity task force,” which Jayapal served on, did not include a maximum of how many drugs could be negotiated. The task force also recommended that generic drugs be included in negotiations. H.R. 3 only applied to drugs that have no generic competition, since those tend to be the most expensive. Democratic leadership argued at the time the federal government doesn’t have the capacity to negotiate prices for an unlimited number of drugs, and it wouldn’t be a good use of time or money to negotiate prices that are already low or reasonable compared to other countries. Another obstacle is fierce opposition from the drug companies, which argues other sectors of the health care industry are not being held accountable for their role in rising costs.

A report issued by the Senate Finance Committee last month faulted a “broken” drug pricing system that incentivizes drug companies to raise list prices to ensure their products are covered by insurance companies. The report places a lot of blame on pharmacy benefit managers (PBMs), middlemen that negotiate with drug companies on the behalf of insurance plans, large employers and other payers for discounts, also referred to as rebates, on a drug’s list price. PBMs charge fees and are paid a percentage of the rebate. This arrangement also translated into higher sales volumes and revenue for drugmakers, according to the report. Drug companies have pushed for rebate reform that would require that those savings be passed down to patients. Insurers argue they already do this by lowering premiums. Drug companies also support capping out-of-pocket costs for seniors. Language doing so is in H.R. 3 and other drug pricing bills. Still, some

Medicare patients must pay a percentage of a drug's list price at the pharmacy counter, so they are affected when prices go up.

Regardless of lobbying by the drug industry, Democrats appear intent on following through on their years-long promise to allow Medicaid to negotiate drug prices. Even Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV), one of the most moderate members of the Senate, whom Democrats know they must win over to pass their priorities, has backed drug pricing negotiation legislation in the past. Negotiation has been part of the Democratic playbook for almost 20 years, said one Democratic aide. "I wouldn't expect all of a sudden the caucus as a whole to say, let's go do something else." [Source: The Hill | Jessie Hellmann | February 21, 2021 ++]

Multivitamins

Study Findings Show Zero Health Benefit

If you are taking a multivitamin, there is a good chance you feel great. But there's an even higher likelihood that those positive feelings are all in your head. In fact, multivitamins have zero health benefit, according to findings from a recent study published in the online medical journal [BMJ Open](#). However, the study — which looked at people with dozens of physical and mental illnesses, and how multivitamin use impacted their well-being — found that adults who regularly take multivitamins self-reported [30% better](#) overall health than people who don't take such vitamins. Multivitamin/mineral supplements are widely used, with some estimates indicating that one in three Americans alone takes them regularly: the industry is worth billions of dollars.

As part of the study, researchers looked at data on more than 21,000 people. The data was collected as part of the 2012 U.S. National Health Interview Survey. Of these people, nearly 5,000 regularly took multivitamins, while the rest did not. On average, those who took multivitamins were:

- Significantly older
- Had higher household incomes
- Were more likely to be women, college graduates and married
- Were more likely to have health insurance

After assessing the physical and psychological health of the people in the study — based on participant responses to survey questions — the researchers concluded that those who took multivitamins were no healthier than those who did not, although the first group reported feeling better. The researchers said they could not determine exactly why people who took multivitamins reported feeling healthier. It is possible that people who take multivitamins trick themselves into thinking they feel better due to the pill. Or, those who take multivitamins may on average just be naturally more positive than those who do not take vitamins.

Lead researcher Manish Paranjpe, a student at Harvard Medical School in Boston, told HealthDay that those who take multivitamins are wasting money: "We believe that money could be better spent on things that we do know have a positive health benefit, such as eating a healthy diet." Exercising and socializing also are likely to pay bigger dividends than taking multivitamins, Paranjpe says. [Source: MoneyTalksNews | Chris Kissell | March 4, 2021 ++]

Understanding TRICARE Cost

The Key Is Knowing the Language Used

Have you ever received a medical bill that was higher or lower than you expected it to be? If so, you aren't alone. Health care cost language can often be confusing, and it may not always be clear how much you need to pay for a particular health service. The good news is that familiarizing yourself with [cost terms](#) and [how your TRICARE plan works](#), can help you get the most out of your coverage and avoid surprises. "Knowing which [beneficiary group](#) you fall into is a good place to start," said Mark Ellis, chief of the Policy and Programs Section of the TRICARE Health Plan at the Defense Health Agency. "Whether you're in Group A or Group B is part of what determines your enrollment fees or premiums and any other per service out-of-pocket expenses you may have with your TRICARE plan." Following are some other common TRICARE cost terms to look out for the next time you need to see your doctor or pay your bill.

Enrollment Fee

Are you a retiree or retiree family member who isn't eligible for Medicare? If so, you may be required to pay an [enrollment fee](#)—an annual amount—for your TRICARE coverage. This applies to [TRICARE Prime](#) (including [US Family Health Plan](#)) and [TRICARE Select](#). Active duty service members (ADSMS) and their family members have no enrollment fees.

Premium

Depending on your health plan, you may have a monthly or quarterly premium. This is the amount you pay to maintain your TRICARE coverage. Premiums apply to [premium-based plans](#), such as:

- [TRICARE Retired Reserve](#)
- [TRICARE Reserve Select](#)
- [TRICARE Young Adult](#)
- [Continued Health Care Benefit Program](#)

TRICARE-allowable charge

This is the maximum amount TRICARE will pay a doctor or other provider for a procedure, service, or equipment. This applies to all TRICARE plans. According to the [TRICARE Choices in the United States Handbook](#), "Nonparticipating non-network providers may charge up to 15% above the TRICARE-allowable amount." Keep in mind, this doesn't apply to your catastrophic cap, which we'll touch on below.

Catastrophic Cap

The [catastrophic cap](#) is the most you pay out of pocket each year for [TRICARE covered services](#). This includes costs, like enrollment fees, deductibles, copayments, and other cost-shares based on the TRICARE-allowable charge. Remember that not all costs apply to the catastrophic cap. These exceptions include:

- Premiums (premium-based plans)
- [Point-of-service fees](#) for TRICARE Prime

Annual deductible

A [deductible](#) is the amount you pay before cost-sharing actually begins. It applies to these plans:

- [TRICARE Select](#)
- [TRICARE Overseas Program Select](#)

- [TRICARE Reserve Select](#)
- [TRICARE Retired Reserve](#)
- [TRICARE Young Adult Select](#)

Remember, if you're enrolled in a [TRICARE Prime](#) plan, you have to meet your annual deductible when using the [point-of-service option](#). This option allows non-ADSMs to see a TRICARE-authorized provider other than their primary care manager for any nonemergency services without a referral.

Cost-share

A [cost-share](#) is the percentage of the total cost of a covered health care service that you pay after your annual deductible is met (if a deductible applies to your plan). Sometimes you may have more than one cost-share, depending on the type of care you receive. An example of this would be if you see different doctors on the same day. Cost-shares aren't applicable to ADSMs.

Copayment

This is often mistaken for cost-share and vice-versa, but these two terms are different. The difference is that a [copayment](#) is a fixed dollar amount (for example, \$30) that you pay for a covered service or prescription, whereas a cost-share is the percentage of the total cost (for example, 25%). Copayments also depend on your TRICARE plan, beneficiary category, group, the type of service you receive, and whether the service is provided by a network provider.

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Keep in mind, ADSMs don't have any out-of-pocket costs. If you're an active duty family member enrolled in a TRICARE Prime plan, you won't have copayments unless you're using the [point-of-service option](#) or filling a prescription outside of a [military pharmacy](#). Looking for more on this topic? Visit the [TRICARE Cost Terms](#) page for definitions. The [TRICARE Costs and Fees Sheet](#) and [TRICARE Compare Cost Tool](#) are also helpful if you need to see specific dollar amounts. And, of course, your [TRICARE contractor](#) is available if you have questions. By understanding cost terms, you can make informed health care decisions for you and your family. [Source: Tricare Communications | March 3, 2021 ++]

Colon Cancer

Update 09: New Law Ends a Surprise Cost for Medicare Patients



Medicare patients who have a polyp removed during a colonoscopy no longer will be on the hook for hundreds of dollars in out-of-pocket fees, thanks to a bill former President Donald Trump signed into law late last year. After years in the making, Congress incorporated the bill — formally named the Removing

Barriers to Colorectal Cancer Screening Act, but also called the “**Medicare Loophole**” bill — into an end-of-year legislative package. The new law closes a costly loophole for Medicare beneficiaries.

The Affordable Care Act of 2010 requires health insurance providers to cover colorectal cancer screening, like colonoscopies, without cost-sharing for people ages 50 to 75. But a loophole meant that if a polyp was removed during a colonoscopy, it was no longer considered a screening for those on Medicare. In turn, that meant patients who were not expecting to pay a dime for their colonoscopy suddenly could be on the hook for hundreds of dollars in costs. The nonprofit Colon Cancer Foundation explains: “While the 2010 Affordable Care Act ensured that Medicare fully covers preventive screening for colorectal cancer, removing a polyp found during a routine screen makes it a diagnostic procedure, which adds a cost-sharing responsibility on the patient. As a result, the patient may end up having to pay 20% of the cost for removing the polyp as co-insurance, and this surprise bill may amount to several hundred dollars ...”

Under the new law, Medicare patients will no longer be required to pay coinsurance if a polyp is found and removed during a screening colonoscopy, according to the foundation. The bad news is that the law will be phased in — meaning that cost will be phased out — over eight years, starting in 2022 and ending by 2030. Anjee Davis, president of Fight Colorectal Cancer, and Lisa Lacasse, president of the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, write in The Hill that the new legislation makes it easier for people to schedule a screening, knowing they will not be stuck with an expensive surprise bill.

They note that despite the fact colorectal cancer is largely preventable with screening, it is the No. 2 cancer-killer among U.S. men and women, and it disproportionately affects people of color. Colorectal cancer will kill an estimated 53,000 Americans this year. As the pair wrote: “For colon cancer, the average age at the time of diagnosis for men is 68 and for women is 72. Eliminating cost sharing for colonoscopy screenings in Medicare means more Americans will have access to this lifesaving procedure.” [Source: MoneyTalksNews | Chris Kissell | March 9, 2021 ++]

Alzheimer Disease

Update 21: Possible Link to Blast Exposure



Recent Army-funded research shows that troops exposed to military explosive shockwaves are at a higher risk for developing Alzheimer’s disease – even if they didn’t receive a traumatic brain injury from the blast. The U.S. Army Combat Capabilities Development Command, the Army Research Lab, National Institutes

of Health and researchers at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke have uncovered the link, according to an Army statement. “This finding may explain those many blast-exposed individuals returning from war zones with no detectable brain injury, but who still suffer from persistent neurological symptoms, including depression, headaches, irritability and memory problems,” said Dr. Gen Bahr, the William C. Friday distinguished professor of molecular biology and biochemistry at UNC-Pembroke.

The neurological complications from blast incidents without a TBI symptom or diagnosis may be “rooted in distinct alterations to the tiny connections between neurons in the hippocampus,” according to the statement. The hippocampus is a part of the brain particularly involved in social behavior and encoding memories. The research was published recently in “Brain Pathology,” the medical journal of the International Society of Neuropathology. “Blasts can lead to debilitating neurological and psychological damage, but the underlying injury mechanisms are not well understood,” said Dr. Frederick Gregory, program manager, Army Research Office. “Understanding the molecular pathophysiology of blast-induced brain injury and potential impacts on long-term brain health is extremely important to understand in order to protect the lifelong health and well-being of our service members.”

Researchers took slices of hippocampus from a rat’s brain and exposed the living tissue to controlled blast waves. The exposure led to selective reductions in parts of the brain necessary for memory, and electrical activity from those neuronal connections was sharply diminished, according to the statement. Those findings indicated Alzheimer’s-type effects in the brain without the recognizable brain damage that is present with TBI. While blast exposure is not a guarantee of developing Alzheimer’s disease, the new research indicates that such exposure does present an “increased risk” of developing the condition. “Early detection of this measurable deterioration could improve diagnoses and treatment of recurring neuropsychiatric impediments and reduce the risk of developing dementia and Alzheimer’s disease later in life,” Bahr said. [Source: ArmyTimes | Todd Smith | February 27, 2021 ++]

Dental Care

Update 06: Baby Teeth



A baby’s 20 primary teeth are already present in the jaws at birth and typically begin to appear when a baby is between 6 months and 1 year. Most children have a full set of 20 primary teeth by the time they

are 3. Check out the baby teeth eruption chart above to see the order in which teeth break through and at what ages you can expect specific teeth to appear. Every child is different, but usually the first teeth to come in are located in the top and bottom front of their mouth. When teeth first come in, some babies may have sore or tender gums. Gently rubbing your child's gums with a clean finger, a small, cool spoon or a wet gauze pad can be soothing. You can also give the baby a clean teething ring to chew on. If your child is still cranky and in pain, consult your dentist or physician.

If you have a plan with the TRICARE Dental Program, your child will be automatically enrolled on the first day of the month following his or her 1st birthday. If you had a single plan before your child turned one, your premium will change from the single plan rate to the family plan rate. You can choose to enroll your child prior to reaching age 1, but your child will be automatically enrolled at age 1. To learn more, download the TRICARE Dental Program Handbook at www.tricare.mil/publications.

Most children have a full set of 20 primary teeth by age 3? By age 6, your child will lose their first baby tooth. This is a normal process and it means a permanent tooth is on the way. As your child's teeth continue to grow, the American Dental Association (ADA) encourages keeping them healthy and clean by brushing twice per day using fluoridated toothpaste. "Baby teeth are very important to your child's health and development," according to the ADA. "They help him or her chew, speak and smile. They also hold space in the jaws for permanent teeth that are growing under the gums."

Watching your child's diet makes a difference, too. Limit sugary treats, like cookies, and choose fruits and vegetables. And don't forget to schedule regular dental visits. With the TRICARE Dental Program (TDP), you may begin to take your child for TDP covered dental visits as soon as he or she reaches age 1. These visits can help prevent dental issues, like plaque or cavities. They're also a good opportunity to ask questions. Visit www.mouthhealthy.org/en/az-topics/b/baby-teeth for more baby teeth tips. To find a pediatric dentist near you, use the Find a Dentist Tool at www.uccitdp.com. [Source: TRICARE Denial Program Newsletter | Issue 1 2021 ++]

Hydration

Update 01: How to Stay Hydrated

Water – and staying hydrated – is a crucial tool in your MOVE Weight Management Program's tool belt to preventing the negative effects of dehydration. Dehydration occurs when there is not enough water in the body. Water loss naturally happens throughout the day. Our bodies naturally get rid of water as we breath, through various biological processes, and by slowly evaporating through the skin to help maintain body temperature.

Signs of dehydration include dark colored urine, fatigue, dizziness and confusion. According to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (HANES) data, in 2005-2010, U.S. youth drank an average of 15 ounces of water and in 2011-2014, U.S. adults drank an average of 39 ounces of water on a given day. These figures are low. It is recommended that an individual drink half an ounce to one ounce of water for every pound that they weigh. Thus, a man who weighs 180 pounds would aim to drink between 90 and 180 ounces or 0.7 & 1.4 gals of water per day.

Staying hydrated has many health benefits. Barring any specific medical conditions, most people should drink when they are thirsty. You should try to get at least half of your daily fluid from water. Fluids can be consumed through various foods and other beverages, such as:

- Calorie-free flavored water.
- Fruit and vegetable juices with no added sugars.
- Milk and milk-substitutes.
- Decaffeinated and herbal teas.
- Low sodium broth or soups.

A common complaint to registered dietitians is that drinking water gets boring. But there are many ways to flavor your water by livening up your cup with fruit and herbs. These can be added to both hot or cold water:

- Citrus fruit – Add lemons, limes, oranges, and/or grapefruit to water.
- Mint – Break apart or muddle the leaves to release the flavor.
- Pomegranate seeds.
- Orange, lemon, lime, strawberries and cucumber are all good options.
- Sliced cucumber and citrus fruit.
- Ginger and lemon.
- Strawberries and mint.
- Cucumber, lemon, mint and rosemary.

Try these flavor combinations or freeze them into ice cubes to add later to water. This is a great way to add nutrition to your glass. Staying hydrated may even help prevent headaches, aid in relieving constipation, and help with preventing kidney stones. Some tips to help you increase your daily intake are:

- Don't exclusively rely on thirst. As we age, our bodies lose the ability to detect thirst. Also, certain medications can cause dehydration.
- Eat more fruits and vegetables. Most fruits have 80 to 90% water content. They are a great alternative, and supplement, to drinking plain water. For a listing fruits and their water content along with fiber, fat, protein, sugar, and vitamins refer to www.thefruitpages.com/contents.shtml.
- Use the color of your urine as a guide. If the color is light yellow or clear, you're drinking enough fluids. If it is dark yellow, you need to drink more.
- Have a beverage that you enjoy with every meal and snack. A glass of water or a cup of juice can really help. Even caffeinated drinks-while they should not be your primary source of hydration-can contribute to you daily water needs.
- Have a glass of water or juice on arising in the morning, since you've had no fluids for many hours.
- Drink constantly throughout the day rather than several 'big gulps' at once—this meets your body's needs better and may prevent the problem of frequent urination.
- If you have problems with constipation, it could be because you don't drink enough water—our bodies need water to balance the fiber intake that comes from fruits, vegetables, and grains.
- Fluids are more easily absorbed from the body when they are somewhat cooler, about 40-60 degrees. Keep a 1 or 2 quart bottle of water in your refrigerator and make sure you need drink and refill it daily.
- When you pass a drinking fountain, stop for a refreshing drink.

- Always have a bottle of water with you – treat it like your phone, so the water bottle goes wherever you go.

[Source: Vantage Point | February 28, 2021 ++]

Patchy Skin **Vitiligo Explained**



Your skin is often the first thing other people see. You may have noticed that some people have patches of white skin. This discoloring is called vitiligo. Vitiligo isn't contagious. It's an autoimmune disease. That's a condition in which the body's immune system mistakenly attacks and destroys the body's own cells. Normally, your immune system defends your body from germs. But in vitiligo, immune cells kill the cells that produce the skin's color. These pigment cells are called melanocytes. Sometimes, vitiligo causes areas of hair to go white as well. People with vitiligo may also develop inflammation in the eyes or ears. These parts of the body also contain melanocytes.

To diagnose vitiligo, your doctor will look closely at your skin. They may use a special type of light that makes spots of vitiligo look chalky. You might also have a skin sample taken to look for pigment cells. The condition isn't painful. But some people experience itching while the skin is losing color, explains Dr. John Harris, a skin expert at the University of Massachusetts. Some people feel distressed at the loss of their skin's color. They may develop low self-esteem or a poor self-image from concerns about their appearance. "Vitiligo can cause a reduction in quality of life, because it tends to involve parts of the body that can't be hidden," says Harris. But treatments are available. And special makeup can help hide the discoloring.

Some treatments aim to slow or stop the disease from getting worse. Others may restore the skin's color. But these can take time to work. And some areas of the body are easier to treat than others. A type of light therapy called UVB phototherapy is commonly used to treat the disorder. It uses special lamps that encourage the pigment cells in your skin to regrow. Light therapy works better on some parts of the body than others. For example, it rarely works well on the hands, Harris says, "but the face is the easiest to treat." Some people may need medications that suppress the immune system. These can be given as skin creams or pills.

If someone stops treatment, vitiligo comes back, Harris explains. His team is looking for ways to make the immune system "forget" the melanocytes. That would prevent it from attacking them. Drugs that suppress the immune system "are like cutting the power to the house to turn off the light in your bedroom,"

says Harris. “We want to create more targeted therapies.” In severe cases of vitiligo, surgery or bleaching larger areas of the skin to match the white patches may be options. Talk with your health care provider about what steps you can take to help with the condition. See the Wise Choices box for tips on living with vitiligo. [Source: NIH Health in News | March 2021 ++]

COVID-19 Sanitation

Update 08: Can An Air Purifier Help Protect You?

Wearing a face mask, washing your hands regularly, social distancing—we're all familiar with the recommendations for preventing the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) as set forth by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). However, as the number of confirmed COVID cases continues to surge in the U.S., hitting one million in November alone, the need for further protective measures has increased.

The virus that causes Covid-19 is mainly spread through respiratory droplets that are expelled when an infected person talks, coughs, sneezes or breathes, and are inhaled by another person. But the virus can also be spread through smaller airborne particles that have been “aerosolized” and linger in the air for minutes or hours. Using a portable air purifier can reduce the airborne viruses and germs in your home and other indoor spaces. While furnace filters and HVAC systems have built-in filters, these portable devices add a layer of air cleaning to individual rooms. Air purifiers filter out airborne contaminants and clean the air in an indoor space. Many people in the scientific community prefer the term “air cleaner,” because they clean the air, not “purify” it.

These devices typically consist of a filter and a fan: The air purifier pulls air in, passes it through a filter that removes small airborne particles and then dumps clean air back in the room. Some experts recommend using an air purifier as an additional way to keep your home—and your family—safe, especially if your space isn't well-ventilated. "Since most COVID viruses spread through droplets and/or aerosols, these airborne pathogens can be captured by the air purifier filter," Dr. Wei-Ning Wang, associate professor of mechanical and nuclear engineering at the Virginia Commonwealth University College of Engineering, says. But how effective are air purifiers at actually preventing the spread of COVID-19? And if you decide to invest in one, which purifier should you buy amid the pandemic?

How well air purifiers work against COVID-19 remains to be seen. "We want to be clear that at this time, **no portable air purifier manufacturer has been able to test against the COVID-19 virus,**" David Hill, Dyson Engineer and Design Manager, says. Due to the lack of research, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) cautions against relying solely on a purifier to stay safe. However, it can be used in addition to other safety measures like regular sanitation and cleaning for extra protection. "By itself, air cleaning or filtration is not enough to protect people from exposure to the virus that causes COVID-19," the agency says. "When used along with other best practices recommended by CDC and others, filtration can be part of a plan to reduce the potential for airborne transmission of COVID-19 indoors."

The most important thing to look for is an air purifier with a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter, according to both medical experts and the EPA. "These filters are capable of capturing at least 99.97% of particles as small as 0.3 microns," Dr. Wang explains. "Most airborne pathogens are in a micrometer-size range. This means that a HEPA filter can remove almost all of these allergens." The EPA

also recommends choosing an air purifier that is Clean Air Delivery Rate (CADR) certified and can remove most airborne particles smaller than 1 mm.

Additionally, be sure to use an air purifier that's specifically designed for the size of the room where you will be using it. "Air circulation is key. Without projecting the purified air around the room, you may risk only purifying a small bubble around your machine instead of the whole room," Hill explains. "By projecting the clean air into the room you ensure even room mixing allowing for the 'dirty' air to be pushed towards the machine to be purified."

[Source: www.usatoday.com Amanda Tarlton | November 20, 2020 ++]

Covid-19 Headgear

Update 17: New Label Will Help You Buy the Best Mask

In one short year, slipping a face mask over your nose and mouth has become part of everyday life. The vast majority of us wear masks in public to help contain the spread of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus. But how do you know if your mask is doing a good job? Until now, it's largely been guesswork. That is changing, though, as the global standards organization ASTM International has approved a new standard for barrier face coverings — that is, reusable protective face coverings (excluding respirators and surgical masks, for which ASTM has separate standards). The standard — technically known as F3502 — includes requirements that barrier face coverings achieve specific benchmarks when it comes to criteria such as:

- Design and general construction
- Particle filtration efficiency levels
- Sizing and fit testing
- Labeling instructions
- Guidance on cleaning and recommended periods of use

Consumer Reports says new labels could appear soon on masks that meet these guidelines. While companies can start pursuing the new standard now, it will take time for them start selling face coverings that are labeled for compliance with the standard. According to the publication: "To meet the standard, manufacturers need to have their masks tested by an independent third-party lab. The products that pass will be able to note on their labeling that they are certified as ASTM-compliant, which will signal to consumers that those face coverings have been vetted." ASTM has created two classifications for the mask standard, Consumer Reports says:

- Level 1: The minimum level required to meet the ASTM standard, this classification includes masks that filter out at least 20% of particles smaller than 1 micron — roughly the size of respiratory droplets that typically carry the coronavirus.
- Level 2: Masks with this classification offer more robust protection, filtering out at least 50% of such particles.

Jose-Luis Jimenez, a professor of chemistry at the University of Colorado in Boulder who studies aerosols (tiny solid or liquid particles suspended in the air), told Consumer Reports that the new standards

will go a long way toward helping consumers choose masks that will protect them from becoming sick: “I can guarantee you that half of what is sold doesn’t meet either level 1 or level 2 of the new standard. So as the standard starts to be applied, consumers will have a way to choose.” For more on staying safe from COVID-19, check out “[This Simple Mistake Might Weaken Your COVID-19 Vaccination.](#)” [Source: MoneyTalksNews | Chris Kissell | March 8, 2021 ++]

Coronavirus Trials & Studies

Blood Clotting Treatments

The National Institutes of Health has launched the last of three Phase 3 clinical trials to evaluate the safety and effectiveness of blood thinners to prevent life-threatening blood clots in adults diagnosed with COVID-19. The first patient in the trial was enrolled on 15 FEB. Part of the Accelerating COVID-19 Therapeutic Interventions and Vaccines (ACTIV) initiative, the trial explores the use of Eliquis® (apixaban 2.5 mg), a blood thinner, or anticoagulant, donated by Bristol Myers Squibb/Pfizer, in patients who have been discharged from the hospital following a diagnosis of moderate-to-severe COVID-19, the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2.

The ACTIV-4 Convalescent trial is the third of the ACTIV-4 Antithrombotics master protocol for adaptive trials. The other two – one focused on hospitalized COVID-19 patients and the other on patients with COVID-19 who have not been hospitalized – are already underway. The trials are being conducted at more than 100 sites around the world. These trials are overseen by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), part of the NIH. Early in the coronavirus pandemic, researchers noticed that many patients who died from COVID-19 had formed blood clots throughout their bodies, including in their smallest blood vessels. This unusual clotting, one of many life-threatening effects of the disease, has caused multiple health complications, from organ damage to heart attack, stroke, and pulmonary embolism.

The ACTIV-4 trials will answer critical questions about the proper use of blood thinners or anticoagulants – called antithrombotics – in the treatment of patients with COVID-19, particularly those who suffer from life-threatening blood clots. Recruiting at sites with a significant COVID-19 burden, ACTIV-4 Convalescent is a randomized and placebo-controlled trial. Researchers will assess if, within 45 days of being hospitalized, patients develop any thrombotic complication – heart attack, stroke, blood clots in major veins and arteries, deep vein and pulmonary thrombosis, or death.

Trial planning and development work is being done through a collaborative effort with a number of institutions, including Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, University of Pittsburgh; University of Illinois at Chicago; Brigham and Women’s Hospital, Boston; the Medical College of Wisconsin; the University of California, San Francisco; and the University of Ottawa and the Ottawa Hospital Research Institute. For more details on the COVID-19 Thrombosis Prevention Post-hospital Thromboprophylaxis Trial refer to <https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT04650087>.

[Source: <https://www.nih.gov/news> | March 8, 2021 ++]



Libraries

10 Things That Are Free With a Library Card

The libraries of today are so much more than dusty shelves and librarians who shush you. Dee Culbertson, director of the Madison Public Library in Madison, Ohio, points out that libraries are rapidly becoming cultural centers with access to everything imaginable — even if you don't actually visit the library: “We love that our patrons can check out everything from a character-shaped cake pan to driving cones from our library. They can use the same library card to access free online resources — including LinkedIn Learning, the Sony music catalog, streaming video and more. The library's not just about books anymore.” So, before you spend money on a subscription or a one-time purchase, call your local library. Following are examples of the varied items you can check out and the services you can access for free through libraries.

1. Streaming video

For years, it's been possible to check out DVDs and Blu-ray discs from your local library. But you might even get free access to streaming services courtesy of your library membership. For example, if your library partners with the streaming service Kanopy, you can access more than 30,000 commercial-free films from the comfort of your home. Visit Kanopy's [website](#) to find out if your library participates, or ask your library if it offers access to any streaming video services.

2. Electronic publications

Looking for a magazine or a book to read on your mobile device? Your library card might give you access. Find out if your library offers access to apps such as [Flipster](#) which is for digital magazines, or [OverDrive](#), which is for e-books and audiobooks. As long as you have the right login credentials for such an app, you can download or otherwise read various publications for a set period of time, free of charge. Norfolk, Virginia, resident Zack Miller listens to audiobooks while working out, using OverDrive through the Norfolk Public Library. “I reserve audiobooks through the library and save hundreds of dollars per year,” he says.

3. Online courses

[LinkedIn Learning](#) offers its catalog of online courses free to patrons of participating libraries. So, ask your library if it partners with LinkedIn Learning or similar services. Los Angeles resident Ky Trang Ho used her free LinkedIn Learning access through the Los Angeles Public Library to take blockchain technology courses. “This is pretty cool when you consider that there are 13,000 courses and a LinkedIn Learning [membership] starts at \$24.99 per month,” Ho says.

4. Self-improvement classes

Check to see what types of self-improvement classes and seminars are offered through your local library. You might be surprised to discover that you can learn about budgeting, take foreign language lessons and

practice using technology at the library for free. “To get this formal training elsewhere, it could easily cost \$30 per session,” says Danielle Bayard Jackson of Tampa, Florida, who uses libraries in the Hillsborough County Public Library Cooperative. “At our local library, it’s free.” Take your life to the next level — and maybe even make new friends — by taking classes at your local library.

5. Museum passes

Nancy Selig of Milton, Massachusetts, was thrilled to discover that the Milton Public Library [offers free passe](#) to museums in Boston. It’s also possible to find free passes to museums and other local attractions at other public libraries around the country. Check your library’s website or ask a librarian.

6. 3-D printing

Culbertson, of the Madison, Ohio, library, points out that some libraries are becoming makers’ laboratories. Ohio’s Madison Public Library offers 3-D printing and even laser engraving. Many libraries have 3-D printers, which can allow you to try out this technology — or even print out simple household items, like a spoon or a phone case, at a discount. If you want access to cutting-edge technology but are not ready to buy it yet, call your local library. See what is available there.

7. Party supplies

Throwing a party and need supplies? “Our library has those things available for loan,” says Culbertson. Some libraries offer access to bakeware, fondue pots, pasta makers, chocolate fountains and even large coffee makers, says Culbertson. These items are often too pricey to buy for a one-off event, but your library might have a stash of nontraditional items you can borrow.

8. Co-working space

Free Wi-Fi in libraries, along with quiet spaces, can provide you with a place to do your homework or even work on your business in peace — without the price tag that comes with renting a desk at a shared workspace. Feiran Liu, the owner of a strategy consulting firm in San Francisco, uses the study rooms at the San Francisco Public Library to work. “Before there were co-working spaces, there were libraries,” says Liu. “The public library is helping me save at least \$300 a month by allowing me to use a nice, quiet study room.”

9. Meeting rooms

Looking for a place to hold meetings? Some libraries will let you reserve meeting rooms for free, especially if you are part of a nonprofit or similar type of group. Check with your library if you’re hard-pressed to find a meeting place for your organization.

10. Babysitting

Maybe you shouldn’t actually view your public library as a babysitter. However, if you’re looking for something for your toddler or elementary-age child to do — and you’re looking for a little sanity — the library might just be a gift. Selig points out that her public library offers after-school programming, including educational and hands-on activities for young children and even teenagers. Check to see if your library offers clubs — including chess, book and even role-playing-game groups — that can keep the kids occupied.

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Miranda Marquit | August 11, 2019 ++]

IRS Stimulus Checks

When and How to Expect the Third One

Now that President Joe Biden has signed on 11 MAR the American Rescue Plan Act — the law that authorizes the third round of stimulus payments — the IRS can start issuing those payments. You could receive your third and biggest stimulus payment as early as this weekend, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said in a press conference after the bill signing this afternoon. That timeline comes the day after the White House announced that the government is “working to ensure that we will be able to start getting payments out this month.”

The IRS showed with the second round of stimulus payments that it is capable of a prompt start. The federal agency began issuing the second round much faster than the first — on 29 DEC, the second business day after the signing of the law that authorized the second round of payments. Of course, just because the IRS’ past performance indicates your third stimulus payment could arrive in a matter of days doesn’t necessarily mean it will. The legislation that authorized the second round of payments required that those payments be sent by Jan. 15, 2021. The American Rescue Plan Act technically gives the IRS until as late as Dec. 31, 2021, to issue the third round of payments.

Additionally, the American Rescue Plan Act was passed smack in the middle of federal income tax season. And this season, the IRS reportedly is struggling to issue some folks’ tax refunds on schedule. For a more precise timeline for the third round of economic impact payments, as the IRS calls them, keep an eye on IRS.gov. The agency said in a statement 10 MAR: “The IRS is reviewing implementation plans for the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 that was recently passed by Congress. Additional information about a new round of Economic Impact Payments and other details will be made available on IRS.gov, once the legislation has been signed by the President.”

The White House’s announcement 10 MAR also noted that the government aims to issue more stimulus payments via direct deposit this time around, as it’s “substantially faster than checks.” If your latest tax return contained direct deposit or bank account information, the IRS will be able to issue your third stimulus payment electronically, the White House said. If the Treasury can’t determine your bank account, expect to receive your third payment via paper check or debit card. You can find out if your latest return contains direct deposit or bank account information by looking at the “Refund” section on the second page. Specifically, check lines 35b, 35c and 35d on the 2020 tax return form or lines 21b, 21c and 21d on the 2019 return.

The IRS will go by your 2020 federal income tax return if you have filed it already. Otherwise, it will go by your 2019 return. One quick way to find out if your payment has been forwarded is to check <https://www.irs.gov/coronavirus/get-my-payment>. [Source: MoneyTalksNews | Karla Bowsher | March 11, 2021 ++]

Netflix

Could be Cracking Down on Viewers Who ‘Borrow’ Passwords

If you have been hitching a ride on the Netflix account of a friend or family member, the gravy train may be about to stop. Netflix is cracking down on sharing of passwords by people who don’t live in the same household, according to recent reports. Some customers who engage in this practice have received a warning message, according to [The Streamable](#): “If you don’t live with the owner of this account, you need your own account to keep watching.” And simply ignoring the message is not an option. Instead, you are told that to continue watching, you need to verify the account with an email or text code, or create a new account.

The Streamable reports that you get a 30-day free trial when you create an account, which may ease the sting of learning that gratis Netflix soon could be a memory. [GammaWire](#) is also reporting on the new Netflix strategy — and expressing some surprise at the decision. As GammaWire reports: “The most notable part of this whole test is that Netflix has long claimed letting people borrow passwords has been one of their strongest marketing channels. While never officially confirmed, there were reports that Netflix had metrics showing those who used other people’s Netflix accounts were highly likely to sign up for their own accounts.”

The Streamable reached out to Netflix, and a company spokesperson confirmed that sending the messages to viewers is a “test” intended to make sure “people using Netflix accounts are authorized to do so.” While cracking down on borrowed passwords might seem like a new tack, Netflix’s terms of use clearly state the following: “*The Netflix service and any content viewed through our service are for your personal and non-commercial use only and may not be shared with individuals beyond your household.*” So, it is likely that the end of free Netflix streaming is near. Given that reality, you might want to investigate other options for free or low-cost streaming services. You will find some ideas in “[15 Free Streaming Services to Watch While Stuck at Home.](#)” [Source: MoneyTalksNews | Chris Kissell | March 12, 2021 ++]

Social Security Taxation

Update 16: Stimulus Payments Impact

Everyone loves a free check. Seeing Uncle Sam suddenly drop money into your savings account is likely to stoke your patriotic spirit. But is there a downside to all that unexpected money? Specifically, if you are a senior, is it possible that the stimulus money could push up your income to the point where you suddenly owe taxes on your Social Security benefits or see those benefits taxed at a higher rate? Millions of Americans pay no federal income taxes on their Social Security benefits. But millions of others are not so fortunate. Up to 85% of Social Security benefits can be subject to federal taxes if what is known as your “combined income” is at least \$25,000 for singles or \$32,000 for married couples filing jointly. “Combined income” is defined as the sum of:

- Your adjusted gross income
- Any nontaxable interest
- One-half of your Social Security benefits

So, the question remains: Will those stimulus payments push your combined income high enough that Uncle Sam soon will come knocking on your door? Thankfully, the answer is “no.” Technically, the stimulus payments are not a form of combined income — or any other kind of income. Instead, they are considered to be advance payments of tax credits. Specifically, the stimulus money is an advance payment of what is known as a recovery rebate credit. So, they have no impact on whether you pay taxes on Social Security.

If you don’t get a stimulus check, you instead can claim the recovery rebate credit when you file your annual taxes. So, enjoy spending your stimulus money with a worry-free mind. Or better yet, use the check to build a stronger foundation for the rest of your retirement. For more on the latest round of stimulus checks — and other changes that might be coming your way courtesy of the federal government — check

out “[7 Hidden Tax Credits in Democrats’ Latest Relief Bill.](#)” [Source: MoneyTalksNews | Chris Kissell | March 5, 2021 ++]

Kroger vs. Walmart vs. Aldi Which Is Cheaper for Groceries?

Cheapism surveyed grocery prices for 41 common food items at three different types of stores: Walmart, the superstore with bottom-dollar prices; Aldi, the German grocer with a growing chain of discount supermarkets; and Kroger, the nation’s largest traditional grocery store. Their comparison also took into account product selection, convenience, customer service, and other factors that might help set one store apart.

To find out which of the stores was the cheapest, they checked prices on the same items, but not necessarily the same brands, at three stores in the same western Ohio market area. To make the grocery store price comparison fair, they calculated a per-unit price for like items of unequal amounts or sizes, and then used that result to determine the total cost for the most commonly sold quantity. For example, russet potatoes were available at both Aldi and Walmart in 10-pound bags but Kroger was selling 8-pound bags, so we projected the cost of a 10-pound bag at Kroger using the price per pound.

Shopping carts were with several products from each department, including milk, a dozen eggs, and butter from the dairy case; chicken breast and ground beef from the meat counter; enough produce to make a decent salad; condiments such as ketchup, ranch dressing, and peanut butter; frozen foods such as pizza and family-size lasagna; bread and buns from the baked goods aisle; and staples such as pasta, flour, chicken broth, soda, juice, and cereal. For shoppers who prefer not to buy generic equivalents of their favorite brands, they also did a Walmart vs. Kroger price comparison of popular name-brand products. They compared prices on 30 national brands — products like Jif peanut butter, Uncle Ben's rice, and Dannon yogurt. Here’s what was found:

- Aldi was the cheapest grocery store. In their price comparison of mostly store-brand items, the grocery bill at Aldi was about 14% cheaper than at Walmart and 24% cheaper than the lowest prices available at Kroger. However, more than 90% of the products at Aldi are private label, and the discount grocer carries few national or regional brands.
- Totals for the 41 items were Aldi \$67.34, Walmart \$78.23, Kroger \$90.82, and Kroger Plus Card \$88.65. For an item by item listing refer to <https://reviews.cheapism.com/cheapest-groceries-walmart-vs-kroger-vs-aldi>.
- For a name brand comparison between Walmart and Kroger (most of which Aldi does not carry), the totals were Walmart \$85.70 and Kroger \$104.80.

Sometimes the best grocery store is not the cheapest grocery store. Although shoppers might pay more at Kroger, the traditional grocery store beats Aldi and Walmart for sheer variety of products (both packaged and fresh), abundant sale items, and shopping convenience. But for the best-quality store brands, along with swift and efficient service, Aldi was rated the best.

Although many consumers are partial to particular brands, store brands help shoppers save money. One expert quoted by Consumer Reports estimates as much as \$3,000 a year for the average family of five. Of the stores compared, Aldi reigned when it comes to store-brand quality — unsurprising given that the

chain relies on private labels for the bulk of its sales. To help convince shoppers that its store brands are just as good as big names, Aldi backs purchases with a “double guarantee” that grants both a refund and a replacement for anything deemed unsatisfactory. Cheapism’s Aldi private label taste test found that more than half the items sampled were either dead ringers for the national brands they were trying to imitate or extremely close. Aldi brands took the top spot in three categories in the 2019 Product of the Year survey based on votes by over 40,000 consumers.

Store brands carried by Kroger are big business for the retailer, and each of its supermarket outlets is said to stock as many as 15,000 private-label products, from groceries to home goods and even clothing. The grocer has had particular success with its Simple Truth line of organic and natural selections, now the largest such brand in the country, with more than \$2 billion in sales in the past year. It also produces private-brand products that are unique, as opposed to copycats of existing national brands. Take, for example, Kroger Deluxe Unicorn Swirl ice cream, which has inspired a social media frenzy (and spawned a Walmart knockoff of its own) or the store’s Private Selection General Tso’s Chicken potato chips.

Kroger was named Store Brands magazine’s 2018 Retailer of the Year for its expansion of its private brands in response to consumers’ wants and needs, Walmart lags in this category. Putting aside critiques regarding questionable ingredients, surprising calorie counts, and other nutritional no-nos, many of the store-brand items simply don’t deliver on taste. That’s not to say everything’s a dud — they found some Great Value store-brand foods that deliver quality and savings — but they haven’t seemed to ignite as much shopper loyalty as other chains’ products. Walmart itself has acknowledged a need to tweak and beef up its private-label offerings.

Because Aldi is just a fraction of the size of its competitors, an employee is never far away to assist customers. The chain’s obsessive focus on efficiency has led it to plaster its products with bar codes to speed up checkout. They saw Aldi clerks fly through large transactions and never waited in line there for more than a few minutes. The store is clean and bright, and it’s easy to find what you need while grocery shopping. However, some shoppers might be turned off by some of the store’s quirks, which include having to fork over a quarter for carts, pay for bags, and bag your own groceries. There are also no curbside pickup options here, although the chain has partnered with Instacart for delivery.

In contrast, the neighborhood Kroger visited was massive. Fortunately, on their shopping trips, employees were still relatively easy to find for assistance. Although checkout was not as speedy as Aldi’s, it rarely took long, with plenty of open lanes as well as express checkout and self-checkout for smaller orders. Kroger continues to innovate ways to get customers out the door faster, introducing a “Scan, Bag, Go” program that allows shoppers to scan items as they shop and pay with a smartphone. The store’s grocery pickup program is also a well-oiled machine. Customers shop online and pay \$5 for someone else to round up their items and bring them to their car. (The fee is waived on the first three orders.)

Walmart is dogged by negative perceptions that it’s dirty, crowded, and staffed by workers who are indifferent, hard to find, or both. While the local store seemed clean enough, it was definitely packed, and workers were hard to track down when assistance was needed. Checkout lines were long because too few registers were open. Still, it’s not all bad news here: Walmart’s grocery pickup program receives solid marks, and unlike Kroger’s, it’s free. The chain is also rolling out a Delivery Unlimited program that could be a game changer for many shoppers: For \$98 a year (or \$12.95 a month), subscribers get as many grocery orders dropped on their doorstep as they’d like. [Source: Cheapism

Tax Credits

Update 01: Seven in Democrats' Latest Relief Bill

Taxpayers stand to get a lot more than a stimulus check out of the trillion-dollar legislation as it currently stands. The most widely known provision of the \$1.9 trillion relief package before Congress might be a third round of stimulus payments, but that measure is hardly alone. The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, as it's currently known, is hundreds of pages long. The stimulus payments, which are technically tax credits, aren't even the only provision of the legislation that stands to affect Americans' income taxes. For example, the relief package would change multiple federal tax credits, at least temporarily.

So, here's a look at some of the ways your federal income taxes could change if the version of the American Rescue Plan Act passed by the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives /becomes law. Discussions in the Senate indicate that some parts of the pandemic-related legislation are liable to change before passage. But the following provisions are not among those hotly contested, for the most part. Additionally, many of these provisions are actually echoes of campaign promises made by Democratic President Joe Biden.

Another recovery rebate credit

Check <https://www.irs.gov/coronavirus/get-my-payment> if you are not sure if the first two 2020 stimulus checks were sent to you. Your potential third stimulus payment technically would be a tax credit that is paid in advance. It's called the recovery rebate credit. So, just as most taxpayers received two stimulus payments last year and eligible folks who didn't receive the payments can instead claim the recovery rebate on their tax return this filing season, the same rules would be in effect for this latest stimulus payment: Either you get the payment this year, or claim the rebate next tax season.

You can learn more about the third round of payments in "[Why Your Next Stimulus Check Might Be Bigger Than You Expect](#)." Note, however, that at least one aspect of these \$1,400-per-person payments is expected to change before legislation is signed into law: the upper end of the eligible income ranges. The Hill reported 2 MAR that under an alternate version of the relief package that the Senate is considering, individuals earning \$80,000 or more would not receive a payment at all, whereas that cutoff was \$100,000 in the version of the bill passed by the House. Couples earning \$160,000 (as opposed to \$200,000) or more would not receive a payment at all. This basically would mean fewer households with well-above-average incomes would qualify for a third stimulus payment. The lower end of the eligible income ranges would not change.

A more generous earned income credit

The American Rescue Plan Act calls for several changes to the earned income credit, which is a refundable tax credit for taxpayers with low to moderate incomes. For example, [current eligibility](#) requirements for the credit say you must have at least one qualifying child — or, if you don't have a qualifying child, you must be at least 25 but less than 65 years old. The House's legislation would lower the minimum age from 25 to 19 for some taxpayers (24 for typical college students), and eliminate the maximum age for 2021. That would enable more young adults and seniors to qualify for the credit when they file their taxes next year.

The House-passed version of the legislation would also make the earned income credit more valuable for people without qualifying children. The maximum amount of the credit would rise from \$543 to \$1,502

for such taxpayers. Biden’s official campaign platform also called for expanding the earned income credit to make it available to older workers, as we detailed during the campaign season in [“5 Ways Joe Biden Would Reshape Retirement.”](#)

A more generous child and dependent care credit

The child and dependent care credit is a nonrefundable tax credit for eligible taxpayers who pay for child care so that they can work. The American Rescue Plan Act would make the credit more valuable, including making it refundable, for the 2021 tax year. A nonrefundable tax credit can lower your tax bill but cannot increase your refund or result in you receiving a refund when you otherwise wouldn’t. A refundable credit, on the other hand, potentially puts more money in your hand: It can increase your refund or result in you receiving a refund even if you don’t owe any taxes. Biden’s campaign platform also promised an expansion of the child and dependent care credit, including making it refundable, as we detailed in [“7 Ways Your Taxes Could Change Under Biden.”](#)

A more generous child tax credit

The child tax credit is a partially refundable tax credit for eligible parents who have qualifying children age 16 or younger. Under the House-passed American Rescue Plan Act, the credit for the 2021 tax year would be:

- Fully refundable
- Worth more money — \$3,000 per child (\$3,600 per child under age 6)
- Available for qualifying children age 17 or younger

The legislation also directs the Treasury Department to set up a program to pay out the child tax credit in advance installments. So, instead of someone who qualifies for the credit in 2021 receiving the money when they file their return in 2022, they would receive the money in installments this year. All of these changes to the child tax credit are exactly as proposed by Biden when he ran for president (although he did not specify for how long he intended them to last). So, you might think it’s safe to assume that with a Democratic-led Congress, these changes will survive the rest of the legislative process intact. But it’s possible that at least the provision calling for advance payments of the child tax credit could change.

In a press announcement issued 2 MAR, Sen. Mike Crapo (R-ID) of the Senate Finance Committee and Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-IA) of the Senate Judiciary Committee noted that they have requested more information from the IRS about the feasibility of regular, advance payments of the child tax credit. Their latest letter to the IRS, dated 1 MAR, notes that the federal agency would need nine to 12 months to update its technology for the change, and an estimated \$393.1 million to cover the costs of technology changes, staffing and outreach.

3 health-related tax breaks

The American Rescue Plan Act also includes several new or improved tax credits that are for health insurance premiums or designed to help households stricken by the coronavirus. The Journal of Accountancy reports that these credits include:

- COBRA premium credit: The legislation creates a refundable, advanceable credit for COBRA continuation coverage premiums. (“COBRA” refers to a federal law that enables workers to continue to be covered by employer health benefits for a temporary period, such as after a job loss.)
- Premium tax credit: The legislation expands this credit (which is for Affordable Care Act insurance premiums) for 2021 and 2022, which also echoes Biden’s campaign platform.

- Family and sick leave credits: The legislation extends these credits for paid sick leave associated with the pandemic (which were established by the Families First Coronavirus Response of 2020) to Sept. 30.

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Karla Bowsher | March 4, 2021 ++]

House Selling

What's With All Those Shady 'We Buy Houses' Signs?



You've probably spotted the signs around your neighborhood: "We buy houses," "Cash for homes" or "Sell us your home as/is!" You may have even groaned at how pervasive they've become. If so, you're not alone. These signs, which come from real estate investment groups that scoop up houses across the country — often paying 10% or more below the market value — are becoming more and more common in today's hot real estate market. The goal? Flip each house into a more expensive property, or turn it into a rental unit. Real estate investors are offering cash for homes in just about any neighborhood in any part of the U.S. these days, no matter the condition of the property, says Nick Bailey, chief customer officer at RE/MAX.

In January 2021, median existing home prices jumped to \$303,900 — 14.1% higher than last year, according to the National Association of Realtors (NAR). Investors who strive to purchase homes below the market value and sell for the highest price possible "are getting more attention ... because it's easier to buy and flip when prices are going up," Bailey says. With home prices rising, homeowners might be tempted to sell their homes quickly, especially if they've lost their jobs or are under financial strain from COVID-19. And since most homeowners don't realize how much their homes are worth, or that a few repairs could up its value for a relatively low cost, an information gap is adding fuel to the fire, according to Eric Sussman, an adjunct real estate professor at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA).

Is selling your home to an investment group always a bad idea? Not necessarily, real estate experts say. But you need to proceed with caution. Real estate investors usually buy homes sight unseen, often in various states of disrepair. That's why they offer less than market value, says Jeremy Brandt, CEO of [WeBuyHouses.com](https://www.webuyhouses.com), which connects sellers with interested investors. They base their offers on several factors, including the market value of a fully restored home in the neighborhood, the area's comparable sales, the cost of repairing the home (including a buffer in case renovations are more than expected) and the expenses of holding the house until it's re-sold. If a homeowner accepts the offer, they use the money to pay off their mortgage (if they have one), and the rest comes to them in cash.

Selling a home with a traditional real estate agent isn't so cut-and-dried: Added costs include an average commission of about 6%, and depending on the state, closing costs that can run from 2% to 5% of the purchase price. Sellers have to pay for repairs, too, and while the home is on the market, they're stuck paying the mortgage and other expenses. In 2020, 89% of home sellers worked with a real estate agent to sell their property, according to NAR. For most homeowners, this route is the best way to fetch top dollar for their home — especially in today's real estate market. Simply put, there are fewer homes on the market right now, so competition is high and many sellers are raking in offers. In most cases, settling for a lower price from an investor just doesn't make sense. "If somebody has a house that's in great condition, and was built in the last 10 years, a real estate investor is certainly not going to be a good fit for them," Brandt says. "They're going to get the most value for their money by selling through a real estate agent."

If you need to sell quickly, Expediency and convenience are the main advantages of selling to a real estate investor. Standard closings can take 30 to 45 days, after all. With an investor, it might take a week. Homeowners who opt to sell to investors are typically in foreclosure or have homes that need repairs they can't afford. Another common scenario is someone who inherits a home in a state they don't live in. "When time is more important than your equity," going through an investor may be the right choice, RE/MAX's Bailey says. Still, he adds, there are usually better alternatives. Some cheap repairs, like a fresh coat of paint or an upgraded backyard, can add thousands in additional equity. Even if that's not an option, lots of buyers are scooping up homes that aren't in tip-top shape in today's market.

How to spot a scam

Unlike real estate agents, investors don't have to be licensed, so almost anyone can enter the space and start making offers on homes. "There's a lot of seminar novice real estate investors jumping into the market because they see that it's so hot, and they think they're going to get rich quick," Brandt from WeBuyHouses.com says. There are plenty of straight-up bad actors, too. Attorneys general in states like New Jersey and Pennsylvania have issued alerts about scammers who back out of promises to pay off a seller's mortgage after the deed is signed. Other nefarious investment groups threaten to back out of a sale last-minute unless a homeowner makes surprise repairs.

Homeowners need to do their homework if they plan to sell to an investor, UCLA's Sussman says. Make sure they're represented by a legitimate company: Check out their website, trace the phone number that's listed on the sign and talk to local real estate agents to get their take. "Information and education are power, as far as I'm concerned," he says. "These buyers are obviously in the money-making business. As long as you're OK with that and aware of their strategy, well, sell." [Source: MoneyTalksNews | Erica Sweeney (Opinion) | March 9, 2021 ++]

Test Prep Scams

Update 01: Scammers Target Parents of High Schoolers

For parents of high school students, SAT scores are a huge deal. With college admissions and scholarships on the line, paying for tutors and test prep materials may be the worth the price. But watch out for con artists eager to take advantage of this. Scammers – with access to kids' names and school information – are tricking parents into paying for bogus SAT prep materials.

How the Scam Works

- You get an unsolicited call from a person claiming to be from the [College Board](#), the company responsible for SAT tests, or another educational organization. The caller claims to be confirming your address, so they can send test prep materials, such as books, CDs, or videos, that your child requested at school.
- It seems so believable! Several victims reported to BBB Scam Tracker that the caller even had their child's name, phone number, and/or school information.
- Of course, there's a catch. The caller needs you to pay a deposit, sometimes several hundred dollars, for the materials. They claim it will be refunded when the materials are returned. Unfortunately, if you provide your address and credit card details, the materials will never arrive, and your deposit will never be refunded. Scammers now have your credit card number and other personal information.

How to avoid test prep scams:

- Always be wary of unsolicited callers. If someone calls out of the blue, always research their organization before you share personal information or agree to receive services or products. Look up the business they claim to represent at BBB.org. Search the name along with the words "scam" or "complaint" to find out if other consumers have had negative experiences. Check [BBB Scam Tracker](#) to see if anyone else has filed a report about the company.
- Double check with your child. If scammers say they are calling because of a service your child requested, tell them you need to check with your child and hang up. Make sure their claims are legitimate before you call back or accept a return call. The same is true for [emergency scams](#).
- Understand the College Board's practices. The College Board will never ask you for bank or credit card information over the phone or via email. If a caller suggests otherwise, hang up. Learn more about the [College Board's policies](#).
- Use your credit card when possible. Credit cards may refund your money if they spot a fraudulent charge or if you report one in a timely manner. You may not be offered the same protection if you pay with your debit card or other payment options. Never agree to pay a stranger with a money wire, prepaid cards, or [digital wallet](#), such as Cash App or Venmo.

For More Information

To learn more ways to protect yourself, read about imposter scams. Also, the Federal Trade Commission's alert about test prep cons. If you've spotted a scam (whether or not you've lost money), report it to [BBB.org/ScamTracker](#). Your report can help others avoid falling victim to scams. Find more information about scams and how to avoid them at [BBB.org/AvoidScams](#). [Source: BBB Scam Alerts | March 5, 2021 ++]

State Tax Tips Alabama thru Georgia

Paying taxes may be a fact of life, but depending where you live, you may be able to keep a little extra money in your pocket thanks to some state-specific tax breaks. From socking away money in a college

savings fund to [donating](#) to a charitable cause, there are plenty of ways to save money with available tax credits and deductions — if you qualify. While heading into tax season, shoebox of receipts in hand, keep in mind these money-saving tax tips from each state. Note: Be sure to consult a tax adviser to confirm benefits that might be available based on your state or individual status.

Alabama -- Families and individuals saving for college can benefit at tax time thanks to the [CollegeCounts 529 Fund](#), a plan that offers tax deferral for savings within the account as well as tax-free withdrawals for certain college expenses. The fund can help meet college costs nationwide, even if you don't live in the state. While most states offer 529 plans, Alabama taxpayers have it good: They are eligible for a state income tax deduction up to \$5,000 for individuals and \$10,000 for couples filing jointly when both contribute.

Alaska -- Alaska is one of a handful of states that doesn't withhold personal income tax — the others are Florida, Nevada, South Dakota, Texas, Washington, and Wyoming — which helps save a bundle. The state also exempts from property taxes the first \$150,000 of assessed value for disabled veterans and seniors 65 and older. And if you happen to be a whaling captain recognized by the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission, you can deduct up to \$10,000 for [whaling-related](#) expenses.

Arizona -- Taxpayers who itemize deductions can take advantage of several state-specific [tax credits](#) while getting a federal deduction for the same charitable deductions. The credits include donating to the state's public school system (up to \$200 for individuals and \$400 for family) even if you don't have a student enrolled. Taxpayers can also donate to a qualifying state foster care charitable organization, the Arizona State Department of Veteran Services, and organizations that help the working poor. Other items that may be deductible include fees from cars bought outside the United States and medical expenses.

Arkansas -- Individuals and businesses that own historic properties in Arkansas can make the most of a law that increases the state tax credit on certified rehabilitation projects. While it may not apply to many, if you own a property listed on the National Register of Historic Places or contribute to National Register historic districts, you can claim a tax credit on 25% of at least \$1.5 million of eligible expenses — more than triple the amount before the law was passed. And efforts are underway to [increase the cap](#).

California -- If you rent your home and have personal income tax liability, you may be eligible for the state's [renters credit](#), which applies if your adjusted gross income is \$43,533 or less as an individual or \$87,066 or less if married (or are registered domestic partners) and filing jointly. The credit isn't huge — \$60 for individuals and \$120 for couples — but, hey, everything counts at tax time. Certain income is also [exempt](#) from income taxes, including Social Security, state tax refunds, unemployment compensation, and state lottery winnings (fingers crossed).

Colorado -- Low-income, elderly and disabled taxpayers may be eligible for a rebate on property tax and heating costs, including those paid as part of rent payments or directly. Known as the Property Tax/Rent/Heat Credit rebate, or "PTC" rebate, the total amount is [determined](#) by income and expenses.

Connecticut -- A phaseout of income taxes on retirement income started in 2019, meaning that pension and annuity income on adjusted gross income of up to \$75,000 for singles (or \$100,000 for couples) has hit 28% exemption — doubling this year and continuing to rise year by year until hitting a full [100% in 2025](#).

Delaware -- For such a small state, Delaware offers taxpayers huge benefits in tax season. In addition to tying for the sixth-lowest U.S. property tax, it also has low income tax rates, does not tax Social Security

income, and has no inheritance tax (and no estate tax below \$11.6 million in value) — all of which make a hugely popular destination for retirees. Retirees should also take advantage of a [pension exclusion](#) that offers a deduction up to \$12,500 on income from pensions or retirement savings accounts for residents 60 and older.

Florida -- Sunshine and beautiful beaches aren't the only reason snowbirds descend every winter. Establish residency by crossing the 183-day mark and become eligible to enjoy no income tax, zero taxes on Social Security and retirement earnings, certain investment earnings, and generally [lower taxes](#). Consult a tax professional before moving, though. There are may be other requirements.

Georgia -- Another popular state for retirees, the Peach State offers a number of money-saving opportunities. Georgia does not tax Social Security retirement benefits, and there's no estate or state inheritance tax. Additionally, individuals 64 and older can deduct up to \$65,000 (it's \$130,000 if married) on retirement income. Taxpayers who are 62 and older, or permanently and totally disabled, also may be exempt from tax on most types of retirement income up to \$40,000.

[Source: Cheapism | Danny Jensen | March 09, 2021 ++]

State Fuel Taxes

Changes to Tax Rates Pursued In 11 States

Talks continue at statehouses around the country to implement changes in fuel tax collections. The Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association believes increasing the fuel tax is the most equitable way for states to generate additional revenue. Below is a rundown of some significant efforts to adjust fuel tax rates.

Alaska

An Alaska House bill would raise the state's fuel rate for the first time in a half century. Sponsored by Rep. Andy Josephson, D-Anchorage, the bill would double the 8-cent tax to 16 cents. The 0.95-cent surcharge added to the tax would also increase to 1.5 cents per gallon. Josephson said in prepared remarks the current tax rate is well below the inflation adjustment since 1970. He points out when adjusted the tax rate imposed 51 years ago should be set at 54 cents today. "Alaska's fuel tax has lost 85% of its purchasing power since it last changed," Josephson said. HB104 is in the House Transportation Committee.

Kentucky

Two bills in the Kentucky House are intended to raise fuel rates in the state. Kentucky now collects 26 cents per gallon on gas purchases. Diesel purchases net the state 23 cents per gallon. The taxes are linked to wholesale fuel prices, which allows for regular adjustments. However, since 2016 a "floor" was implemented to prevent rates from dipping. As a result, the rates has remained unchanged. The bill would remove the link between fuel taxes and wholesale fuel prices. Instead, the tax rates would be adjusted annually based on a federal construction index. The initial base rate would add 4.3 cents per gallon for gas and 7.2 cents for diesel. HB508 is in the House Transportation Committee.

A separate bill would raise fuel tax rates and other vehicle fees. Sponsored by Rep. Sal Santoro, R-Florence, HB561 would raise the gas tax rate by 8.6 cents to 34.6 cents. The diesel rate would be increased by 11.6 cents to 34.6 cents. An additional surtax of 4.3 cents for gas and 7.2 cents for diesel would also be tacked on to fuel purchases. One cost reduction tied to fuel tax rates would eliminate collection of the

supplemental highway user tax collected on gas and diesel purchases. The fee is a nickel on each gallon sold. After all the reshuffling, the new gas tax rate would be 33.9 cents and the diesel rate would be 36.8 cents. The tax rates would also be adjusted annually based on a federal construction index.

Louisiana

On Louisiana state lawmaker is planning to pursue an effort to more than double the state's 20-cent fuel tax rate. Rep. Jack McFarland, R-Jonesboro, has indicated he will introduce a bill to increase the excise tax by 10 cents initially. Additional increases of two cents would be made every other year through 2033. Once fully implemented, the tax rate would reach 42 cents. Each additional penny increase is estimated to raise about \$30 million. Approval at the statehouse would require a two-thirds majority vote. Gov. John Bel Edwards and Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development Secretary Shawn Wilson previously have said they support a fuel tax increase. This year, however, both officials have indicated it does not appear to be the right time. They cite the struggling economy.

Massachusetts

Pursuit underway at the Massachusetts statehouse would raise the 24-cent fuel tax rate over three years. The nearly 50-page transportation bill includes a provision to raise the rate by 4 cents in 2024. Two additional annual 4-cent increases would take effect in 2025 and 2026 when the tax would reach 36 cents. The measure is SD2315.

Mississippi

A Mississippi House bill has died that sought to authorize a statewide referendum to raise the fuel tax. The state's current fuel excise tax is 18 cents. It is unchanged since 1987. House Ways and Means Chairman Trey Lamar, R-Senatobia, introduced a bill to raise the gas rate by a dime to 28 cents. The diesel tax would be raised by 14 cents to 32 cents. HB1364 missed a deadline to advance from committee effectively killing it for the year. Another bill that met its demise in committee called for raising the gas tax rate by 8 cents to 26 cents. HB574 would implement the increases in 2-cent increments over four years. The diesel rate would be increased by 12 cents to 30 cents over the same time. The increases would be implemented in 3-cent increments.

Missouri

In Missouri, as soon as this week the full Senate could take up for consideration a fuel tax increase. The state's 17-cent fuel tax rate has remained unchanged since the mid-90s. According to a fiscal note attached to the bill, the fuel tax raised \$698.7 million in fiscal year 2020. State officials report the state has between \$8 and \$10 billion in unfunded needs for the transportation system. To address the shortfall, the Senate Transportation Committee voted to advance an amended bill to raise the fuel tax rate by 10 cents to 27 cents per gallon. The increase would be phased in over five years. Starting Jan. 1, 2022, the tax would be increased by 2.5 cents every two years until 2027. The dime increase is estimated to raise an additional \$411 million annually. Sponsored by Senate President Dave Schatz, R-Sullivan, SB262 includes the option for Missouri residents to apply for an exemption and refund. If approved by the Senate, the bill would move to the House for further consideration.

Montana

Months after voters in the city of Missoula approved a local gas tax, the House Transportation Committee this week is scheduled to consider a bill do away with the tax increase. Rep. Matt Regier, R-Kalispell, is behind a bill to repeal the 2-cent local excise tax on gas purchases. Diesel fuel was excluded from the increase. Critics of the gas tax increase say it is the wrong time to impose more tax on motorists. Others

have said the county should take steps to better manage revenues already available. To make matters worse, critics have said the local tax is simply piling on when you take into consideration the recent statewide fuel tax rate increases. The Montana Legislature approved a fuel tax increase four years ago to eventually raise \$49 million annually for state and local roadways. The state's gas tax rate has since increased by 5 cents to 32 cents. Another penny increase will be phased in through 2023. Similarly, the state's diesel rate has since increased by about 1.5 cents to 29.45 cents. Another one-half cent increase will be implemented over three years. The bill is HB464.

New Mexico

Time is running out on a New Mexico Senate bill that would raise the state's excise rates. The state now collects a 17-cent excise tax on gas and a 21-cent tax on diesel. A bill from Sen. Bobby Gonzales, D-Ranchos de Taos, would raise both rates by a nickel over five years. At that time, the gas rate would be set at 22 cents and the diesel rate would be 26 cents. SB168 has advanced from one Senate committee and awaits consideration in a second committee. The Legislature is scheduled to wrap up their work for the year next week. According to a fiscal note attached to the bill, the tax increases would raise \$63.6 million by fiscal year 2025 for state and local roads.

North Dakota

A bill halfway through the North Dakota House would increase the state's fuel tax rate. Owners of alternative fuel vehicles would also pay more. The state now collects 23 cents per gallon on diesel and gas sold. Sponsored by Rep. Vicky Steiner, R-Dickinson, HB1464 would increase the excise rate by 3 cents to 26 cents. The original version called for a 6-cent increase. Additionally, the \$120 and \$50 road use fees for electric and hybrid vehicles would be increased to \$200 and \$100 respectively. The bill is in the Senate Finance and Taxation Committee.

West Virginia

One West Virginia lawmaker wants to give truck drivers a break on fuel taxes. The state now collects a 20.5-cent excise tax on fuel purchases. Sponsored by Rep. Tom Fast, R-Fayette, the bill would require a refund for diesel fuel consumed by a commercial vehicle for operation outside the state. HB2523 is in the House Technology and Infrastructure Committee.

Wyoming

A bill in the Wyoming House to raise the 24-cent fuel tax rate has taken its first step forward. The House Transportation Committee has voted to advance a bill to tap the funding source to enhance support for state and local road projects. Specifically, HB26 would increase the tax on gas and diesel by 9 cents to 33 cents per gallon. The tax on alternative fuels would be raised by the same amount. A change made in committee would phase in the increase over three years. Each penny increase is estimated to raise \$6.7 million yearly. The Wyoming Department of Transportation reports \$135.6 million in unfunded operating expenses. The amount includes \$72.3 million in construction and maintenance. The bill would raise an estimated \$60.3 million annually for state and local roads, according to information provided by the agency. A fiscal note attached to the bill shows that the state's highway fund would collect about \$40.2 million. Another \$14.1 million would be allotted to county roads, while cities and towns would get \$5.9 million. The remaining \$1.2 million would be set aside for state parks. The bill has moved to the House floor.

[Source: Land Line | Keith Goble| March 9, 2021 ++]

Tax Burden for Minnesota Vets

As of MAR 2021

Many people planning to retire use the presence or absence of a state income tax as a litmus test for a retirement destination. This is a serious miscalculation since higher sales and property taxes can more than offset the lack of a state income tax. The lack of a state income tax doesn't necessarily ensure a low total tax burden. States raise revenue in many other ways including sales taxes, excise taxes, license taxes, intangible taxes, property taxes, estate taxes and inheritance taxes. Depending on where you live, you may end up paying all of them or just a few. Following are the taxes you can expect to pay if you retire in the state of Minnesota:

Sales Taxes

The state sales tax rate is **6.875%** which has been in place since 1967. The average sales tax after local surtaxes is 7.287% which is lower than 67.3% of states.

- Groceries, clothing and prescription drugs are exempt from sales tax.
- Counties and cities can charge an additional [local sales tax](#) of up to 1%, for a maximum possible combined sales tax of 7.88%
- There are 231 [special sales tax jurisdictions](#) with local sales taxes in addition to the state sales tax.
- Alcoholic beverages are taxed an additional 2.5% over the general state sales tax rate for a total tax of 9.375%.
- Prepared foods are taxed at 10.775%
- Some items may not be eligible for these reduced sales tax rates, such as expensive clothing, unhealthy food or drinks like soda, and certain non-essential pharmaceuticals. Candy and soda are not treated as groceries, which means they are not subject to reduced grocery sales tax rates. Other items including gasoline, alcohol, and cigarettes are subject to various [Minnesota excise taxes](#) in addition to the sales tax.
- Counties and cities in Minnesota are allowed to charge an additional local sales tax on top of the Minnesota state sales tax (as well as tax specific items) with special government permission. The state sales tax is allocated as follows:
 - 3.5% - Minnesota General Fund
 - 3/8% - Arts and environmental projects

Excise Taxes

An excise tax is a tax directly levied on certain goods by a state or federal government. The most prominent excise Taxes collected by the state government are the fuel tax on gasoline and the so-called "sin tax" collected on cigarettes and alcoholic beverages. Minnesota's excise tax is not the same thing as the Minnesota Sales Tax which is collected as a percentage of the final purchase price of all qualifying sales, and is collected directly from the end consumer of the product. Michigan's excise taxes, on the other hand, are flat per-unit taxes that must be paid directly to the state government by the merchant before the goods can be sold. Merchants may be required to attach tax stamps to taxable merchandise to show that the excise tax was paid. Even though excise taxes are collected from businesses, virtually all merchants pass on the excise tax to the customer through higher prices for the taxed goods. An average of \$599 in yearly excise taxes per capita is collected, one of the highest in the country.

- **Alcohol:** Beer: \$0.47 per gal | Wine: \$.17 per gal | Liquor \$8.59 per gal. The excise tax on beer is higher than 78% of the other states and is ranked 11th highest of the 50 states. The excise tax on wine is higher than 68% of the other 50 states and is ranked 16th highest of the 50 states. The excise tax on Spirits is higher than 74% of the other 50 states and is ranked 13th highest of the 50 states.
- **Cannabis Tax:** none
- **Cellphone:** The average tax collected on cell phone plans is **\$9.38 per phone service plan**, lower than 52% of the other 50 states. The average cellphone tax is ranked 26th highest of all 50 states. The cellphone tax is already included in the service plan price you pay to your service provider, and may be listed as "Misc. taxes and Fees" or "Other" on your
- **Cigarettes:** The excise tax on cigarettes is \$2.90 per 20 cigarettes, one of the highest in the country. The excise tax on cigarettes is the 7th highest of all states. The cigarette tax of \$2.00 is applied to every 20 cigarettes sold (the size of an average pack of cigarettes). If a pack contains more than 20 cigarettes, a higher excise tax will be collected.
- **Fuel:** The excise tax on gasoline is 28.5¢ per gallon, higher than 60% of the other 50 states. The excise tax on gasoline is the 20th highest of all states. The gas tax is included in the pump price at all gas stations and is in addition to the federal excise tax of 18.4¢ per gallon on gasoline and 24.4¢ per gallon, on diesel. The federal tax was last raised in OCT 1993 and is not indexed to inflation, which has increased a total of 77% from 1993 to 2020. For all state and federal taxes by type of fuel refer to <https://www.salestaxhandbook.com/maine/gasoline-fuel>.
- **Vehicle:** A registration fee and a title fee is collected on the sale or transfer of cars and motorcycles, which are essentially renamed excise taxes. Unlike standard excise taxes, however, the end consumer must pay the tax directly to the state's Department of Transportation and receive documentation (registration and title papers) proving the fees were paid.

Personal Income Taxes

The average family pays \$1,263 in Minnesota income taxes which is ranked as 31st highest of all states

Tax Rate Range: 5.35% to 9.85%

Income Brackets: Four.

	<u>Single</u>	<u>Couple</u>	
○	\$0+	\$0+	5.35%
○	\$26,960+	\$39,410+	6.80%
○	\$88,550+	\$156,570+	7.85%
○	\$164,400+	\$273,470+	9.85%

Personal Exemptions: \$4,300. Dependent: \$4,300

Standard Deduction: \$12,400 single or \$24,800 married plus additional \$1650 per person who is over 65 and/or blind. Head of Household \$18,650 plus additional \$1650 if over 65 and/or blind. Limits if AGI is greater than \$197,850

Adjusted Gross Income: AGI amount entered on your U.S. Forms 1040 or 1040NR.

Federal Income Tax Deduction: None

Retirement Income:

- Social Security: Can deduct \$34,020 of federally taxable Social Security income, phase-out starts if income is greater than \$61,080 and gone completely at \$81,180

- IRAs: Taxable at ordinary income tax rates
- 401Ks/Defined contribution employer retirement plans: Taxable at ordinary income tax rates
- Private pensions: Taxable at ordinary income tax rates
- Public Pensions: Portion may be exempt based on income

Retired Military Pay:

- Military Pay
- Active Duty Pay: Exempt
- Military Retirement Pay: Exempt
- Military Disability Pay: Exempt
- VA Disability Dependency & Indemnity Compensation Benefits: Exempt
- SBP/SSBP/RCSBP/RSFPP: Exempt

Tax Credits: You are eligible for a credit of \$120 for each month you served in a combat zone or hazardous duty area if Minnesota is your state of legal residence.

Delinquent Fee: There is no late filing penalty if your return is filed within six months of the due date, which is October 15 for most individuals. If your return is not filed within six months, there is a 5% late filing penalty on the unpaid tax. Also, there is a 4% late payment penalty of the unpaid amount due if you do not pay what you owe by the due date and there is an additional 5% penalty on the unpaid tax if you pay your tax 181 days or more after filing your return. There is a fraud penalty equal to 50% of a fraudulently claimed refund if you claim a refund you do not qualify for.

Website: Minnesota Department of Revenue www.revenue.state.mn.us

Tax Forms:

- https://www.revenue.state.mn.us/sites/default/files/2021-02/m1_inst_20.pdf 2020 Minnesota Individual Income Tax Instructions (Form M1)
- https://www.revenue.state.mn.us/sites/default/files/2021-01/m1_20.pdf 2020 M1, Minnesota Individual Income Tax
- https://www.revenue.state.mn.us/form-search?search_text=income%20tax&field_document_type=All&field_audience=All&field_tax_type=106&field_tax_year=336 All Tax forms

Property Taxes

The median property tax is **\$2,098 per year** for a home worth the median value of \$132,200. Counties in collect an average of **1.05%** of a property's assessed fair market value as property tax per year. Calculation of assessed value is 100% of fair market value. Minnesota is ranked number nineteen out of the fifty states, in order of the average amount of property taxes collected. The state's median income is \$67,702 per year, so the median yearly property tax paid by residents amounts to approximately 3.1% of their yearly income. Minnesota is ranked 21 of the 50 states for property taxes as a percentage of median income.

The exact property tax levied depends on the county in Michigan the property is located in. Carver County collects the highest property tax levying an average of \$2,992 (1.04% of median home value) yearly in property taxes, while Koochichin County has the lowest property tax in the state, collecting an average tax of \$741 (0.64% of median home value) per year.

Property taxes are collected on a county level, and each county has its own method of assessing and collecting taxes. As a result, it's not possible to provide a single property tax rate that applies uniformly to

all properties in the state. For more localized property tax rates refer to the county list at <http://www.tax-rates.org/minnesota/property-tax#Counties>. Deferral programs are available. Relief programs include:

- Regular Property Tax Refund: Tax credit up to \$2,770 if you meet income requirements.
- Renters: Tax credit up to \$2,150 if you meet income requirements.
- Special Property Tax Refund: Tax credit up to \$1,000 if you meet property tax amount requirements.
- Disabled/Over 65/Have Dependents: Additional tax credit may be available.
- Over 65: If income less than \$60,000, tax over 3% of income can be deferred.
- Disabled Veterans/Surviving Spouse/Primary Caregiver: Up to \$300,000 of assessed value may be exempt if over 70% service-connected disability.
- Disabled: Up to \$50,000 of assessed value may be reduced.

In Minnesota the homestead classification applies to properties occupied as primary residences by their owners. Classification as a homestead may qualify the property for

- A classification rate of 1.00% on up to \$500,000 in taxable market value
- a market value exclusion, which may reduce the property's taxable market value
- other programs such as the disabled veterans' market value exclusion, senior citizens' property tax deferral, and property tax refunds

The homestead market value exclusion applies to all homesteads (on farms, it applies to the house, garage, and one acre of land immediately surrounding the house). All homesteads valued at less than \$413,800 can have their taxable value reduced by the exclusion. For information related to calculating the exclusion, contact your County Assessor's office. Applications for homestead are made to, and approved by, the County Assessor in the county where your property is located.

Inheritance and Estate Taxes

Estates over \$3 million are taxed at a rate between 13% and 16%. There is no inheritance tax.

Other State Tax Rates

To compare the above sales, excise, income, and property tax rates to those assessed in other states go to:

- Sales Tax: <http://www.tax-rates.org/taxtables/sales-tax-by-state> & www.salestaxhandbook.com
- Excise Taxes (i.e. gasoline, cigarettes, cellphones, automobiles, beer, wine, and liquor): <http://www.tax-rates.org/taxtables/excise-tax-by-state>.
- Personal Income Tax: <http://www.tax-rates.org/taxtables/income-tax-by-state>.
- Property Tax: <http://www.tax-rates.org/taxtables/property-tax-by-state>.

- Income Tax: <https://taxfoundation.org/state-individual-income-tax-rates-brackets-2019>
- State Tax Comparisons <https://www.moaa.org/content/state-report-card/statereportcard>

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Through the DMV Organizational website at <https://www.dmv.org/mn-minnesota/apply-for-special-license-plates.php> a variety of online services are offered in addition to its branch office locations. At <https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/dvs/Pages/new-to-minnesota.aspx> new residents can find out the state's

vehicle registration requirements. [Source: <https://www.retirementliving.com/taxes-kansas-new-mexico#Minnesota> | MAR 2021++]

* General Interest *



Notes of Interest

March 01 thru 15, 2021

- **Military Sleep.** Pentagon report calls sleep deprivation a hindrance to readiness. Members of the U.S. military aren't getting enough sleep, and the Pentagon thinks it's a significant problem. A [new DoD study](#) estimates 64% of servicemembers routinely sleep for less than seven hours a night. That's nearly double the rate of sleep deprivation among the general public.
- **IRS Backlog.** The IRS hasn't fully identified all the risks it'll face in this year's filing season, but the Government Accountability Office said there's lessons the agency can learn from last year's rollout. The IRS ended 2020 with a backlog of 13 million tax returns, nearly all of them paper forms sent through the mail. The agency spent more than 100 days on average processing tax returns last October. That's compared to its target of 13 days.
- **Drug Cost vs. Death.** A study by the National Board of Economic Research, (NBER) explored how "cost-sharing", in other words co-pays and premiums, can affect patient choices and patient health. The researchers examined Medicare data and found that a relatively modest increase in drug costs (\$10 per prescription) lead to a 33% increase in mortality.
- **VA Handbook.** All new enrollees will receive a personalized Veterans Health Benefits Handbook, generally two weeks after enrollment has been confirmed. The handbooks are tailored specifically for each Veteran and provide detailed, updated information about the VA health care benefits the Veteran may be eligible to receive, such as medications, prosthetics and dental care. Click [Handbook](#) to view a sample. For information about the Handbook or to request an undated replacement, contact call 1-877-222-8387.
- **Vet Jobs.** Military.com at <https://jobboard.militarytimes.com> offers listings of companies looking for vets along with the means to apply for any they might be interested in.
- **Bunker Bingo.** Check it out at https://www.va.gov/outreach-and-events/events/bunker-bingo-1/?utm_source=VReventslink&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=VetResources if your looking for something to do rather than binge-watching more Netflix.
- **South China Sea.** The United States on 3 MAR hailed plans by NATO ally Germany to sail a warship across the contested South China Sea, calling it welcome support for a "rules-based international order" in the region, something Washington says is threatened by China.
- **USS Montana.** The U.S. Navy's newest submarine was formally launched after 5 years on 3 MAR. 7,800-ton Virginia-class submarine is regarded as 92% complete -- final outfitting, testing and crew certification will follow the launching -- it is expected to be delivered to the Navy sometime later

this year. When completed, she will be the 21st in the Virginia class of nuclear-powered fast attack submarines equipped with Tomahawk and Harpoon missiles.

- **Seasonal Flu.** According to an article in Statnews.com, “It is looking increasingly like the U.S. may not experience a flu season this year. To date, fewer than 1,600 people in the entire country have tested positive for influenza since the 2020-2021 flu monitoring period began last October; of those, 32 were recorded in the week ending 27 FEB. The U.S. is not the only country with that experience. Canada and Great Britain have had the same experience.
- **Covid-19 Ivermectin Treatment.** In recent weeks, some cable television programs have been promoting a drug called ivermectin as a “cure” for the coronavirus. However, ivermectin is an anti-parasitic drug used on livestock, and while it is authorized for treatment of specific conditions in humans, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has warned that the drug should not be used to treat or prevent Covid-19.
- **Beer Limitation.** Naval Air Station Pensacola leaders have decided to limit Exchange alcohol sales due to an increase of alcohol-related misbehavior from junior enlisted service members on the base to just one six-pack of beer a day.
- **Vandenberg AFB.** More missile, satellite and rocket launches are planned at Vandenberg Air Force Base in 2021 than last year, and the installation will also officially change its name to Vandenberg Space Force Base.
- **China Defense Budget.** China has announced a 6.8 percent growth in its defense budget for next financial year, representing a slight increase from last year’s percentage increase of 6.6 percent as it continues to modernize its military.
- **Trust in Military.** About 56 percent of Americans surveyed said they have “a great deal of trust and confidence” in the military, down from 70 percent in 2018. The poll includes views of more than 2,500 individuals who were asked questions in early February 2021.
- **Expiration Dates.** There are no federal laws governing the sale of expired food (except baby formula), but no store wants to sell food past its recommended date. Shoppers can get discounts even on shelf-stable goods like pasta, dried soup mixes, and canned sauces with looming expiration dates. These are often fine to use weeks or even months after the date on the package has passed.
- **Website Security.** Secure links start with “https://” and include a lock icon on the purchase page. In the United States, all government websites end in “.gov.” In Canada, government agency websites are under gc.ca.

[Source: Various | March 15, 2021 ++]

Presidential War Powers

Lawmakers Propose Check on Biden’s Use in Middle East

A bipartisan group of lawmakers introduced legislation 3 MAR to repeal the 1991 and 2002 authorizations for the use of military force in the Middle East amid escalating tension between the U.S. and Iran. The legislation S.J.Res 10, which is posted at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-joint-resolution/10/text?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22Todd+Young%22%5D%7D&r=53&s=7>, led by Sens. Tim Kaine (D-VA) and Todd Young (R-IN), comes as lawmakers have complained that President

Joe Biden did not notify Congress or seek its consent before approving deadly airstrikes in Syria. Their efforts could test whether Congress, which fought to reclaim its war-making powers under President Donald Trump, will continue that fight under Biden.

“Last week’s airstrikes in Syria show that the Executive Branch, regardless of party, will continue to stretch its war powers. Congress has a responsibility to not only vote to authorize new military action, but to repeal old authorizations that are no longer necessary,” Kaine said in a statement. “The 1991 and 2002 AUMFs that underpinned the war against Iraq need to be taken off the books to prevent their future misuse. They serve no operational purpose, keep us on permanent war footing, and undermine the sovereignty of Iraq, a close partner.” Kaine told The Hill that the new legislation is the first step in his efforts to update the 1974 War Powers Act and the 2001 authorization.

Last year, Trump vetoed a bipartisan measure from Kaine and others to limit his authority to launch military operations against Iran; the Senate failed to override the veto. The new bill is co-sponsored by Sens. Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), Mike Lee (R-UT), Chris Coons (D-DE), Chuck Grassley (R-IA), Dick Durbin (D-IL), and Rand Paul (R-KY). “The airstrikes against Iranian-backed forces in Syria last week demonstrate the need to review and revise the way in which our leaders collectively choose whether or not to wage war. An initial yet important part of that process is removing unnecessary war-making resolutions that are still on the books,” said Coons, a Biden ally.

U.S. forces struck multiple targets in eastern Syria used by Iranian-backed militant groups 25 FEB in retaliation for recent rocket attacks against bases in Iraq housing U.S. and coalition troops and civilians. Since then, 10 rockets targeted a military base in western Iraq hosting U.S. and coalition troops on 3 MAR. The Defense Department has stood by its strikes on 3 MAR, as Pentagon spokesman John Kirby reiterated arguments that they were “a defensive measure” meant to impact the ability of militant groups to conduct future attacks and send a signal that the U.S. will defend its personnel. “The President, as commander in chief has a fundamental responsibility to act in self-defense of our troops and our assets overseas, nothing’s going to change about that,” Kirby said. [Source: DefenseNews | Joe Gould | March 3, 2021 ++]

Capitol Fence

At Least Take Down the Razor Wire



It was a modest plea from D.C. residents to the Capitol Police during a virtual town hall: If they couldn't take down the 7-foot fence surrounding the Capitol, could they at least remove the razor wire? "It could be the beginning of normalcy," Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton, the District of Columbia's nonvoting delegate in

Congress, suggested to Assistant Police 6 JAN breach of the Capitol remains. Norton, District residents and lawmakers on both sides of the aisle have grown more irritated with the unsightly barriers closing people out of the Capitol — and, in the view of at least some lawmakers, closing some in.

"It's kind of like working in a minimum-security prison right now," Rep. Mark Amodei, (R-NV) told acting Capitol Police chief Yogananda Pittman during a 2 FEB hearing before the House Appropriations Committee. Pittman and Timothy Blodgett, the House's acting sergeant-at-arms, said they are awaiting several security reviews before making a decision about the fence, but that it would remain at least through President Joe Biden's first address to Congress because of threats of violence from militia groups. The date of Biden's address has not been announced. Pittman did not describe the source or credibility of the intelligence, and some lawmakers questioned whether the threat is concrete enough to justify what increasingly feels like the new normal in Washington.

Residents' commutes and recreational activities — bike riding, dog walking, picnics — have been disrupted. They have signed petitions, put up signs and contacted their local representatives. Jay Adelstein, an advisory neighborhood commissioner, noted that the fencing surrounds much more than the Capitol itself. "We have a botanical garden on Independence by the Capitol that is inaccessible. We have the beautiful outdoor Bartholdi Park, which is a gem of the Capitol, that is inaccessible," he said. "No tourist is going to want to come to the Capitol or to Washington, D.C., with the city in such a locked-down state." Reminiscing about the days when he would take his daughters to sled on the Hill, a childhood rite of passage in this neighborhood, Adelstein said, "We've given up too much for too long."

Sen. Tim Kaine (D-VA) said Pittman and Jennifer Hemingway, the Senate's acting sergeant-at-arms, briefed lawmakers on 24 FEB and also mentioned threats by extremist groups, but without any details. "I don't think vague allegations about threats cut it and suggest we need to just leave this razor wire up indefinitely," Kaine said. "Senators were asking on that call: OK, well what's the plan? Give us the date. Give us a timeline. Let us all have an understanding of what's going on. They wouldn't do that." Both Kaine and Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) said the 6 JAN riot was largely a failure of intelligence, rather than infrastructure. "The idea of just making a permanent fortress or a permanent fence is too much of a knee-jerk solution," Van Hollen said.

Norton has introduced a bipartisan bill, co-sponsored by Reps. Ted Budd (R-NC) and Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-NJ) to prohibit the use of federal funds for any permanent fencing, and city officials have joined her in the fight. D.C. Council member Charles Allen, D-Ward 6, who represents Capitol Hill, spearheaded a council letter to congressional officials opposing permanent fencing. He said the security measures are unnecessary and harmful to the city, particularly the closure of parts of Independence and Constitution avenues, two major east-west thoroughfares that are crucial for both traffic and emergency vehicles. "It's already having a massive impact. To me, **it is beyond insulting for the Capitol complex to continue to do this**," Allen said. "They do it with no regard, none, for the 700,000 residents of the District."

Council member Christina Henderson, I-At Large, said many residents' commutes — including her ordinarily quick drive from her toddler's day care on Capitol Hill to her office at the Wilson Building — are a maze of long ways around the fencing. She cast doubt on whether a fence was really necessary to protect the Capitol during Biden's speech. "We've been able to do how many State of the Unions in the past without that massive type of fence?" said Henderson, who was an aide to Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., until she ran for the council last year. "It has never required permanent fencing in order to keep that type of event safe."

Alan Hantman, who oversaw security enhancements after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks when he was architect of the Capitol, said similar debates played out then and after other violence: how to balance public accessibility with public safety. Many of today's physical security measures in Washington, including bollards and planters at federal buildings, can be traced back to the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, he said. After the fatal shooting of two Capitol Police officers in the Capitol in 1998, and again after 9/11, officials sought new security enhancements — including the construction of the Capitol's visitors center, which Hantman oversaw.

But debates were always more nuanced than simply whether to build a wall or not, he said. Security officials and urban planners are expected to find creative architectural solutions to address potential threats. "I don't think we want to see concrete or steel walls around the United States Capitol, because we have this imperative of openness in this free and open society," he said. "This is not Baghdad. What an image that would be around the world to have us fencing ourselves in from our own people." Still, Hantman said he could understand the need for a temporary fence. He recalled some security measures, including the presence of the National Guard at major intersections and the closure of Pennsylvania Avenue near the White House, dragging on for months after 9/11. "Eleanor Holmes Norton sent us letters and pressed us, just as she is right now," he said.

Norton said her strategy is to start small, by asking for the razor wire to be removed. She said she was fine with the fence remaining through Biden's address or as long as credible threats warranted it. But the razor wire "makes our country appear unable to protect its own Capitol unless it is fortified like a prison," she wrote in a letter to the Capitol Police Board on 22 FEB. "I can't say enough what an open Capitol symbolizes for our democracy. You can talk about the White House. You can talk about the Monument. But it's (the Capitol) that really symbolizes what our democracy is," Norton said in an interview. "We cannot let it be fenced in, in this way." [Source: The American Legion | February 22, 2021 ++]

USS The Sullivans

Campaign Raises Repair Funds for Historic Tincan



The Buffalo and Erie County Military and Naval Park has exceeded its goal to raise \$100,000 for emergency hull repairs for USS The Sullivans, but there is more work to be done. Park officials are now focused on raising \$1 million needed for permanent repairs to the historic USS The Sullivans. "We knew Buffalo being the City of Good Neighbors would come through and raise the money needed to keep The Sullivans from sinking, we didn't know we would exceed our initial goal by such a significant amount." commented Paul Marzello, president and CEO of the Buffalo and Erie County Naval & Military Park. "Donations came in and continue to come in from veterans, family members of veterans, the general public, and the business

community. The generosity of the people of Western New York is incredible." At last count, a total of \$230,000 has been raised with more donations coming in.

Lending a major hand in this effort was Scott Bieler, president and CEO of the West Herr Automotive Group. West Herr donated \$50,000 to the effort as a community challenge to accelerate the initiative. "Thank you to Scott Bieler and the West Herr Automotive Group for their leadership gift," Marzello added. Said Bieler, "We know how critical the Naval Park and the USS The Sullivans is to Western New York. When we heard of the emergency fundraising need we immediately felt compelled to help. West Herr is honored and humbled to play a part in assisting this collective community effort." "In addition of making a major contribution to the All Hands On Deck campaign, Douglas Jemal of Douglas Development stepped in and has agreed to captain the next phase of our fundraising effort to raise a total of \$1 million to save The Sullivans," Marzello said.

The plan to permanently repair the hull of the USS The Sullivans requires a full underwater team of divers that will apply an epoxy coating to the entire exterior hull of the ship. The process which creates a water-tight barrier that strengthens and protects the thin steel of the hull from further deterioration is expected to take 3-4 months to complete. The Naval Park is now extending the All Hands On Deck campaign to Save the Sullivans with a goal of raising the \$1,000,000 it needs to permanently repair the USS The Sullivans. Contributions can be made securely online at <https://keepingourshipsafloat.org> or by sending contributions to the Buffalo and Erie County Naval & Military Park, ATTN: All HANDS ON DECK, One Naval Cove, Buffalo, NY 14202 or by contacting the Naval Park directly at 847-1773. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Niagara Gazette | March 3, 2021 ++]

Map Comparisons

U.S. Light Pollution



Light Pollution from Coast to Coast

Afghan Withdrawal

Update 03: Arguments for Staying | Opinion

The momentum to keep American troops engrossed in a 20-year civil war has been given a fresh bolt of energy. The intellectual adrenaline shot was given by the Afghanistan Study Group, co-chaired by former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joe Dunford. Dunford recommended delaying former President Donald Trump's 1 MAY troop withdrawal timetable. Since the 84-page report was published, a flurry of editorials and op-eds have piggybacked on its recommendations. On 19 FEB, Washington Post columnist David Ignatius wrote that "keeping the troops in place a while longer" is probably the best policy option available. The lobbying appears to be having some effect on the Biden administration. According to a source involved with President Biden's Afghanistan policy deliberations, full withdrawal by 1 MAY is "off the table."

None of us should take arguments against withdrawal laying down. Those who are advocating for a sustained presence have a responsibility to explain why the benefits outweigh the costs. For a start, why would the Taliban actually negotiate an extension with the United States? The movement's *raison d'être* is to expel U.S. and foreign forces from Afghanistan on the road to what it hopes will be an Afghan government under its control, or at least under its sway. Taliban fighters have fought against the world's only superpower for 20 years for precisely this purpose. The only reason the Taliban agreed to sit down for talks with U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad in late 2018 was that the Trump administration was willing to discuss withdrawal as part of the negotiations. To expect Taliban negotiators to accommodate the U.S. now, regardless of what additional concessions Washington may put on the table, is based on hope, not reality.

Second, what evidence is there that keeping U.S. troops in Afghanistan for another six months will positively affect the intra-Afghan peace talks? Those who make this link overestimate what the U.S. military can do. They also ignore the history of these peace talks. After all, it took seven months for the Afghan government and the Taliban to complete a prisoner exchange process that was designed to be a confidence-building measure. Another three months went by before the parties could agree on what to talk about. Since December, the process has been essentially frozen in place, with both delegations trading blame for stonewalling and making excessive demands. All of this is occurring despite the roughly 10,000 U.S. and NATO troops still in the country. On what basis do we believe that a few more months will do what the last 20 years have not?

Third, and most important from the U.S. standpoint, proponents of jettisoning the May 1 withdrawal date consistently underplay the risks of staying in Afghanistan. The Taliban have made it abundantly clear what would happen if the Biden administration decided to stick around: more war and less peace. Taliban fighters are preparing for escalated operations in preparation for precisely this scenario. U.S. troops would again be prime targets for Taliban offensives, exponentially increasing the prospect of additional U.S. casualties. And as U.S. casualties go up, the pressure in Washington to respond with more troops and more firepower would go up along with it. All of a sudden, a six-month extension turns into the continuation of an indefinite conflict.

Biden needs to think long and hard about what the U.S. can achieve in Afghanistan. He must demand specific answers as to the benefits of a U.S. troop presence past 1 MAY. He must question whether

sacrificing more American blood and treasure is the price we need to pay for a peace that may never come.
[Source: Washington Examiner | Daniel DePetris (Opinion)| February 25, 2021 ++]

Afghan Taliban

Update 05: Elite Forces Struggle To Roll Back Their Advances



Reduced U.S. military support in battles against the Taliban is frustrating efforts by Afghanistan's elite forces to roll back the militants' advances here, with decreased airstrikes and a shortage of advanced technology slowing their ground operations. Taliban militants have mounted a violent, months-long campaign to expand influence across the country as the United States has withdrawn troops, closed bases and halted offensive operations against the militants in keeping with a peace deal it signed a year ago. The militants have taken control of key highways and conducted operations aimed at choking off Afghan towns and cities. The surge has forced the Afghan government to deploy its most highly trained units to the front lines, a move demonstrating that rank-and-file security forces have struggled to protect key parts of the country from the Taliban's continued violence.

The Afghan Special Forces leading the fight have received the highest level of U.S. training and make up just under a fifth of the country's security forces. But with peace talks between the two Afghan sides stalled and violence expected to increase this spring, fatigue from near-constant rotations and reports of high casualty rates suggest the fight is unsustainable. "We have really brave soldiers and tough soldiers, really (well) trained by U.S. Special Forces," said Gen. Haibatullah Alizai, the commander of Afghanistan's Special Operations Corps. He said the limited U.S. support his forces are receiving is "very helpful." "The only thing we are missing for now," he said, "is the technology and more air support."

The prolonged battles against an emboldened Taliban come as the 20th anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks — and the 20th anniversary of the start of the war — approach this year. Coalition forces ousted the Taliban from power in October 2001 for sheltering the al-Qaida militants involved in the 9/11 attacks. Gen. Scott Miller, the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, has pledged to continue to defend Afghan government forces against Taliban attacks despite drawing down U.S. troops to 2,500 — less than a fifth of their number a year ago. As the number of personnel dropped, U.S. bases across the country were shuttered, forcing the Pentagon to move munitions and equipment. It's unclear how much was shipped out of Afghanistan. The U.S. Central Command referred requests for comment to the U.S. military command in Afghanistan, which did not respond to questions.

In southern Afghanistan, Alizai oversees some of the most difficult battles against the Taliban. On a recent visit to Kandahar province, he pointed to a row of about half a dozen hangars that were once full of

U.S. warplanes. Now, they sit empty. "We don't want another American soldier to die on the ground here," Alizai said. "The United States has spent billions of dollars (in Afghanistan). They should just give us the technology we need and leave the war to us." Alizai's forces are making slow progress. He said that the current fight, while "difficult," is sustainable, but that "it's impossible to win without the new technology and without increasing the U.S. airstrikes." Alizai said the units under his command need armed surveillance drones, more warplanes and advanced light arms, among other equipment. Over the past year, U.S. airstrikes dropped to around 5% of what they were in 2019, and the Afghan air force is unable to fill the gap, according to Alizai, who is briefed on U.S. strike data that is no longer publicly released.

One key piece of equipment that Alizai said would help the Afghan forces' effectiveness is armed surveillance drones, a tool that was pivotal to U.S. backed gains against the Taliban. Alizai said it takes Afghan forces longer to strike a target after it has been identified by an unarmed drone because an armed aircraft then has to be dispatched. "Most of the time we lose targets," Alizai said. "It makes all of our operations slower." A senior Afghan defense official said the government had not made an official request for armed drones from the United States, but "it is always good for us to have more advanced technology and support." The official spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the issue with the media.

The longer operations are drawn out, the greater the strain on Alizai's forces. Many of the men in his unit said they have been on near-constant rotations from one front line to another over the past six months. The Afghan military does not release casualty numbers, saying the information is classified. Alizai said his forces have suffered casualties but at rates lower than other branches of the Afghan security forces. He refused to release figures. One Afghan officer who oversees the transport of the dead and wounded from Kandahar said 100 to 200 Afghan troops had been wounded each week over the past month. He spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss military casualties, but he refused to discuss deaths. Local media has reported dozens of Afghan troops killed and wounded in the country's south over the past two months.

The battle against the Taliban has seesawed for months on the outskirts of Kandahar city. The second-largest city in Afghanistan, Kandahar holds strategic and symbolic value. Its province was once home to the busiest NATO base in the country, shares a long, porous border with Pakistan and was where the Taliban movement first formally mobilized. At an outpost in Arghandab district, Afghan Special Forces officers juggle radios and smartphones to maintain communication with the Afghan control room back in Kandahar city, U.S. advisers at Kandahar Airfield and Afghan units on the front line a few hundred yards away. A year ago, there would have been about half a dozen American advisers at an outpost like this one, said Lt. Col. Ayatullah Parwani, who coordinates the Afghan and U.S. air support that could be heard buzzing overhead. "If the Americans were here, there would be, like, 10 aircraft flying overhead and the Taliban would be gone in a day," he said. Instead, that day there was one armed U.S. drone and one U.S. warplane above the operation in the nearby valley. After a month of grueling progress, Parwani said his unit had managed to clear just eight kilometers, about five miles.

The Afghan Special Forces fighting in Arghandab were called in after Afghan army and police largely abandoned their posts in the face of a Taliban assault on the agricultural district late last year. Similar patterns played out across the country as Afghan forces struggled to both protect government-held territory from Taliban attacks and roll back recent Taliban advances. Special forces were deployed to Helmand province after the Taliban made a push on its capital in November. Lashkar Gah remains largely besieged, with the militants in control of the key roadways in and out. Elite units are also in the country's north, where

the Taliban almost breached the Kunduz provincial capital in September, and in western Afghanistan, where Taliban fighters are encircling Farah city.

The latest U.S. government watchdog report on Afghanistan found that the number of missions conducted by Afghan Special Forces last quarter was nearly double the number conducted during the same period the previous year. On a recent flight between Kandahar and Camp Shorabak in Helmand — one of the last islands of government-held territory in the province — an Afghan air force pilot pointed out Taliban checkpoints along the highway several thousand feet below. "They are there every day," 1st Lt. Abdullah Pashton said. Pashton runs resupply flights nationwide and estimates that after the Taliban's advances this year, nearly all Afghan military bases outside Kabul require resupply by air because the roads are too dangerous. The Taliban checkpoint he saw from the air in Helmand was 9 miles from the edge of the Afghan base. "There is another base only 15 nautical kilometers north of here," Pashton said after landing at Shorabak, previously known as Camp Bastion. "Even that base, Grishk, we can't reach by road. All resupply there is also by air."

With so few of the country's roads safe for travel, Afghanistan's elite pilots are under particular strain to evacuate casualties, move personnel and supplies, and carry out operations against high-value targets. Capt. Masoud Karimi of Afghanistan's Special Mission Wing, the Special Forces unit within the country's air force, said his team has been carrying out two or three times as many missions as usual in recent months. On a recent evening, he was planning for a resupply operation that had been repeatedly requested for a week but kept getting delayed for higher priorities. And that relentless tempo is taking a toll. Karimi and a colleague, Maj. Zabiullah Surosh, lost four fellow elite pilots when two Afghan helicopters, one evacuating casualties from the battlefield, collided in Helmand late last year. Surosh unrolled a poster commemorating them on one of the tables in his office. "They didn't see each other. ... They just ran into each other," he said. An investigation found that the accident wasn't due to a technical failure or the age of the aircraft the men were flying, Surosh said. "They were too tired," he said. "They had a lot of missions. [Source: The Washington Post | Susannah George | March 7, 2021 ++]

National Defense Policy

Three Wars, No Victory – Why?

America is the most powerful country in the history of the world, yet it has not won any of the three major wars it has fought over the past half century. This has not been due to a lack of effort and persistence. Our troops fought in Vietnam for nine years and in Iraq for a dozen. We're still fighting after 20 years in Afghanistan, where our generals are asking the Taliban to stop attacking. That's not a sign of success; the victor does not make such requests. The fact is that in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, America has failed in its mission to develop and sustain democracies.

What accounts for this trifecta of failure? Through luck and poor shooting by our enemies, in all three wars this writer was able to witness both the actual fighting on the ground and the creation of the high-level policies that shaped the wars. In this article, he lays out what he believe were the root causes of the failures. Oscar Wilde once remarked, "Two kinds of people are fascinating: people who know absolutely everything, and people who know absolutely nothing." The author is rendering one man's opinion, while hoping to fall into neither category.

Broadly speaking, leadership in war comes from three hubs. The first consists of the military commanders who design strategy and decide how our troops will fight. The second hub is the policy-makers, including the president as commander in chief and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs as his military adviser, plus the theater commander, the CIA, the State Department, and the secretary of defense, who all give input. The third hub is the culture and popular mood of our country, as reflected by congressional votes and the slant of the mainstream press. The press does not report “just the facts”; rather, it presents a point of view by selecting which facts to focus upon. The popular mood is the ultimate fulcrum of political power, because the policy hub can’t fight a war without resources from Congress.

I divided the wars into major phases, and for each phase I assigned a percentage of responsibility for failure to each of those three hubs, as shown below. A rating of 0 percent indicates that I do not believe that particular hub contributed to the failure in that phase of the war. A rating of + means that hub contributed to success, not failure. Note that while the locus for failed decision-making shifted from war to war, overall the heaviest responsibility lay with the policy hub in Washington, including the commander in chief.

	Military Strategy	Policy Hub	Popular Mood
1. Vietnam 1965–1967	30%	70%	0%
2. Vietnam 1968–1975	++	30%	70%
3. Iraq 2003–2006	20%	80%	0%
4. Iraq 2007–2011	+++	20%	0%
5. Iraq 2012–2021	+++	80%	20%
6. Afghanistan 2001–2021	50%	50%	0%

1. Vietnam, 1965–67. General William Westmoreland in Saigon waged a campaign of thoughtless attrition, trading American for North Vietnamese lives in random forays into the deep jungle. In Northern I Corps, the Marines went in a different direction, patrolling to push the Viet Cong guerrillas out of the villages. Success was stymied, however, when tens of thousands of North Vietnamese regulars poured south. Ordered not to outflank the enemy by forays into Laos or North Vietnam and kept to a narrow front, our troops fought defensive battles that made no strategic sense and were poorly executed.

What was the root cause of this futile warfighting? Both the commander in Saigon (General Westmoreland) and the commander in chief in Washington (President Lyndon Johnson) shared a solipsistic belief that the North Vietnamese would quit once they comprehended that America was physically stronger. The president granted the enemy a ground sanctuary and refused to bomb their economic and industrial infrastructure or mine their harbors to prevent the delivery of war supplies from China and Russia. Yet no senior American flag officer resigned or publicly objected. During this phase, the press fixated more upon the gore of battle than the lack of strategy. Congress and the public were basically supportive of the war. The senior commanders in Saigon and the policy-makers in Washington bore equal responsibility for a chaotic mess.

2. Vietnam, 1968–75. The enemy threw an all-out assault against the South Vietnamese cities, believing the population would rise up in support. Instead, the exposed insurgent infrastructure was shattered and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars were decimated. American generalship erred from 1965 through early 1968 and then adapted well. Over the next several years, American tactics improved dramatically and

the NVA was driven deep into the jungles. When the American military withdrew in 1972, traffic was moving unmolested throughout most of the populated areas.

The policy hub, however, had lost all power. The American press had portrayed the 1968 assault on the cities as definitive proof that the war could not be won and extolled student protests against the war and the draft. After President Richard Nixon resigned in disgrace in 1974, the executive branch conceded to Congress total control of decision-making about Vietnam. The Democratic Senate and House passed legislation prohibiting U.S. bombing anywhere in Southeast Asia, regardless of provocation. Military aid to South Vietnam was slashed to a pittance, while massive Soviet and Chinese armaments rebuilt the NVA.

In 1975, the NVA seized South Vietnam. It is historically moot whether the South could have survived if we had continued our aid and bombing. The post-war narrative in the American press assigned all blame to South Vietnamese leadership. The policy hub disintegrated with the resignation of President Nixon. In the early 1970s, the popular mood, reflected in the press and Congress, had turned against South Vietnam, assuring its collapse.

3. Iraq, 2003–2006. Iraq had three phases. In 2003, the policy hub, led by President George W. Bush, invaded in order to destroy the Sunni-based Saddam Hussein regime. Our policy leaders then unwisely disbanded the Iraqi army. The American military took its place, declaring that our soldiers and Marines were nation-builders as well as warriors. Our policy-makers then passively abetted the emergence of sly, vengeful Shiite politicians intent upon disenfranchising the Sunni minority. Our top generals in Baghdad bumbled, especially in handing over Fallujah to the al-Qaeda in Iraq terrorist network.

4. Iraq, 2007–2011. But by late 2006, the Sunni tribes in western Iraq had allied with the Marines against the terrorists. General David Petraeus took command and encouraged Sunni neighborhood militias across central and northern Iraq, checking the predatory encroachments of Shiite militias aided by Iran. The policy hub, led by the president, provided firm support and resources. By 2008, Iraq had stabilized militarily. Equally important, the ubiquitous American military presence quashed the threat of a Sunni–Shiite civil war and checked the destabilizing actions of Shiite politicians. After a bad beginning, America had succeeded in constructing a fragile democratic nation. The key to that success was our military units spread across the country, preventing political excesses. Our soldiers were the stabilizing force. The policy hub performed well, except for agreeing to withdraw our troops by 2011.

5. Iraq, 2012–2021. At the end of 2011, the policy hub, led by President Barack Obama, proceeded to pull out all U.S. troops, despite warnings from inside the Pentagon and the State Department. Shiite politicians then oppressed the Sunni tribes, and ISIS surged back, seizing city after city. In 2015, the U.S. had to rush advisers and commandos back in, plus artillery and air support. After ISIS was crushed, in 2020 President Donald Trump, criticizing our military presence in the Middle East, pulled out most of our troops.

American popular opinion played a small role as the Iraq War waxed and waned over the past two decades. With no draft, there was no student protest movement. In huge distinction from Vietnam, the American people and the press supported the troops. The responsibility for first deciding to build a democratic nation (in 2003) and then pulling out all troops (in 2012 and again in 2019) can be found in the policy hub, led by three successive presidents with distinctly opposing points of view. By 2021, only a few U.S. troops remained in Iraq. The Iraqi government was corrupt and ineffectual, and Iran's influence among the Shiites was stronger than America's.

6. Afghanistan, 2001–2021. This is a markedly different story. We invaded to destroy al-Qaeda, which, owing to faulty military decisions, escaped into Pakistan. The policy hub, strongly led by the president, then decided America was obliged to transform a confederation of fractious tribes into a self-sustained democracy. Our military agreed it could accomplish that mission.

Pakistan, congenitally duplicitous, was providing the Taliban with a sanctuary and material aid, while in Kabul an erratic, untrustworthy president railed against American bombing and kept quiet about the Taliban. The country lacked a sense of nationalism and there was no draft. Afghan soldiers from Tajik tribes were sent into Pashtun provinces to fight Pashtun Taliban. For ten years, American and allied soldiers patrolled through disputed hamlets, controlling only the ground they stood upon. Beginning in about 2012, the American/allied campaign strategy focused more upon training the Afghan army. But “the right stuff” wasn’t there. Leadership and morale on the government side remained spotty, while tribal allegiances remained higher than the national one. American commanders adhered to “soft power” enticements, such as construction money, to woo over the Pashtuns. It didn’t work. Year after year, the rural areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan fell under the control of the Taliban.

Yet throughout the deteriorating course of the war, the press and Congress remained largely supportive. The popular mood gradually shifted toward war-weariness, not toward political opposition. Defeating the Taliban failed because Pakistan provided a sanctuary, the Kabul governments were feckless, and the Pashtun tribes, profiting from poppy cultivation, never rejected the Taliban in their midst.

In over a decade of reporting, I embedded in Nuristan, the Korengal, Kunar, Nuristan, Marjah, Nad Ali, Sangin, and places in between. In not one locale did our grunts believe the Afghan soldiers would hold the countryside after the Americans left. Nine American generals held the top command in Afghanistan. Yet throughout their combined tenures, the underlying military doctrine — our soldiers as nation-builders — remained unchallenged. This glaring gap separating the assessments of the grunts from those of the generals demands explanation. Losing wars leads to an inclination for the next generation not to volunteer for tough jobs such as the infantry.

Going forward, American and allied Special Forces and attack aircraft, in small numbers, should remain indefinitely in Afghanistan to avoid a collapse that severely damages our global reputation. A repeat of the 1975 images of Saigon in total panic must be avoided. The die, however, is cast. It’s facts on the ground, not negotiations, that will determine the long-term outcome. American policy-makers were both arrogant and profligate, believing force of arms and a stunning largesse of money could alter a tribal society hurtling headlong into the ninth century. Sooner or later, the country will fracture or the Taliban will control a government that is repressive of human rights and decidedly undemocratic.

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In summary, in all three wars, **the policy hub was primarily responsible for the failures.** In not one case did the president who initiated the hostilities conclude them before he left office. Over the past 70 years, the executive branch has accumulated more power than wisdom. Our Founding Fathers intended to limit the power of the executive branch, with Thomas Jefferson warning about the “idolatry of royalty.” Of the three wars, only in Vietnam did the popular mood, as reflected in the press and in congressional votes, play the final, pivotal role in the failure.

In Iraq, by 2011 our military had established a solid path forward, as long as our troops remained the stabilizing force. In 2012, however, policy-makers snatched defeat from the jaws of victory by peremptorily

withdrawing our troops, allowing the terrorists to reconstitute and resulting in a mess by 2021. In Afghanistan, our security objective post-9/11 was to destroy the terrorist movement. That goal has been largely achieved. But the White House overreached by widening the mission to include nation-building. Our military commanders and the policy hub share equal responsibility for refusing to acknowledge that this was too ambitious. A self-sustaining democratic nation was achievable only if, as in South Korea, we were willing to stay in large numbers for 70 years.

What lies ahead? Clearly we should be pivoting to deter China, and not to engage in another counterinsurgency. In terms of military strategy, the Marine Corps has emerged as innovative in shifting its focus accordingly. The capital investments, however, of the Navy and Air Force do not reflect a pivot to offset China. The Trump administration, while antagonizing our allies, did awaken the public hub to the threat of China's ambitions. But if failure in our past three small wars tells us anything, it is that the policy hub emanating from the White House has grown too confident of its own quixotic infallibility, unchallenged by a divisive Congress that is supine in matters of war. When America is not determined, we lose. There is no sign that the policy hub has the humility to grasp that existential fact.

[Source: National Review | Bing West (Opinion) | February 18, 2021 ++]

Iran Tensions

Update 14: Iran Says 'Time Not Ripe' For Negotiations with U.S.

Spokesperson for the Iranian government Ali Rabiee has said the “time is not ripe” for the United States to join meetings over the Iran nuclear deal, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). At a virtual briefing in Tehran March 2, Rabiee referred to recent diplomatic gestures and proposals from the European signatories to the JCPOA as well as Washington's declared willingness to join the table. “Washington's claims about its belief in diplomacy are but hypocritical and unacceptable rhetoric unless it removes sanctions against Iran,” Rabiee declared.

He described the current status of the nuclear deal as a “deadlock” caused by the United States. “The least Washington could do is a gesture of goodwill to comply with its obligations under Resolution 2231.” The resolution was an attachment to the JCPOA, from which former US President Donald Trump pulled out in 2018. “The [Joe] Biden administration cannot act like that of Trump and expect better outcomes,” Rabiee added.

In another development, the conservative newspaper Vatan Emrooz reported that President Hassan Rouhani has ordered a halt on Iran's production of uranium metal as part of an agreement struck last month between Tehran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Under the JCPOA, Iran has been banned from producing uranium metal. But the process resumed after Iran's conservative parliament passed a controversial law in December requiring the government to reduce its compliance with the accord if the United States failed to remove sanctions by Feb. 23. Yet the Rouhani government continued to adhere to some of Iran's obligations after clinching the temporary agreement with the IAEA.

In his briefing, Rabiee also touched on efforts by some IAEA members to pass a resolution against the Islamic Republic at the agency's board of governors. If such a resolution is passed, he warned, “It will be met with an appropriate response, including reconsideration of obligations Iran has taken up under the

recent deal.” Vatan Emrooz went further, advising the Rouhani government to start working on raising uranium enrichment to 60% if the nuclear watchdog issues such a resolution. The editorial referenced a speech last week by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who threatened that Iran reserves the option of pursuing enrichment at that level. [Source: AI-Monitor | March 2, 2021 ++]

China’s Nuclear Arsenal

Update 03: Satellite Images Suggest Hastening Effort for More Survivability



China appears to be moving faster toward a capability to launch its newer nuclear missiles from underground silos, possibly to improve its ability to respond promptly to a nuclear attack, according to an American expert who analyzed satellite images of recent construction at a missile training area. Hans Kristensen, a longtime watcher of U.S., Russian and Chinese nuclear forces, said the imagery suggests that China is seeking to counter what it may view as a growing threat from the United States. The U.S. in recent years has pointed to China’s nuclear modernization as a key justification for investing hundreds of billions of dollars in the coming two decades to build an all-new U.S. nuclear arsenal.

There’s no indication the United States and China are headed toward armed conflict, let alone a nuclear one. But the Kristensen report comes at a time of heightened U.S.-China tensions across a broad spectrum, from trade to national security. A stronger Chinese nuclear force could factor into U.S. calculations for a military response to aggressive Chinese actions, such as in Taiwan or the South China Sea. The Pentagon declined to comment on Kristensen’s analysis of the satellite imagery, but it said last summer in its annual report on Chinese military developments that Beijing intends to increase the peacetime readiness of its nuclear forces by putting more of them in underground silos and operating on a higher level of alert in which it could launch missiles upon warning of being under attack.

“The PRC’s nuclear weapons policy prioritizes the maintenance of a nuclear force able to survive a first strike and respond with sufficient strength to inflict unacceptable damage on an enemy,” the Pentagon report said. More broadly, the Pentagon asserts that China is modernizing its nuclear forces as part of a wider effort to build a military by mid-century that is equal to, and in some respects superior to, the U.S. military. China’s nuclear arsenal, estimated by the U.S. government to number in the low 200s, is dwarfed by those of the United States and Russia, which have thousands. The Pentagon predicts that the People’s Liberation Army Rocket Forces will at least double the size of its nuclear arsenal over the next 10 years, still leaving it with far fewer than the United States.

China does not publicly discuss the size or preparedness of its nuclear force beyond saying it would be used only in response to an attack. The United States, by contrast, does not rule out striking first,

although President Joe Biden in the past has embraced removing that ambiguity by adopting a “no first use” policy. Kristensen, an analyst with the Federation of American Scientists, said the commercial satellite photos he acquired appear to show China late last year began construction of 11 underground silos at a vast missile training range near Jilantai in north-central China. Construction of five other silos began there earlier. In its public reports the Pentagon has not cited any specific number of missile silos at that training range.

These 16 silos identified by Kristensen would be in addition to the 18-20 that China now operates with an older intercontinental ballistic missile, the DF-5. “It should be pointed out that even if China doubles or triples the number of ICBM silos, it would only constitute a fraction of the number of ICBM silos operated by the United States and Russia,” Kristensen wrote on his Federation of American Scientists’ blog. “The U.S. Air Force has 450 silos, of which 400 are loaded. Russia has about 130 operational silos.” Nearly all of the new silos detected by Kristensen appear designed to accommodate China’s newer-generation DF-41 ICBM, which is built with a solid-fuel component that allows the operator to more quickly prepare the missile for launch, compared to the DF-5’s more time-consuming liquid-fuel system. The DF-41 can target Alaska and much of the continental United States. China already has a rail- and road-mobile version of the DF-41 missile.

“They’re trying to build up the survivability of their force,” by developing silo basing for their advanced missiles, Kristensen said in an interview. “It raises some questions about this fine line in nuclear strategy,” between deterring a U.S. adversary by threatening its highly valued nuclear forces and pushing the adversary into taking countermeasures that makes its force more capable and dangerous. “How do you get out of that vicious cycle?” Kristensen asked.

Frank Rose, a State Department arms control official during the Obama administration, said recently there is little prospect of getting China to join an international negotiation to limit nuclear weapons. The Trump administration tried that but failed, and Rose sees no reason to think that will change anytime soon.

“They’re not going to do it out of the goodness of their heart,” he said, but they might be interested in talking if the United States were willing to consider Chinese concerns about related issues like U.S. missile defenses. Rose says China’s main interest is in building up its non-nuclear force of shorter- and intermediate-range missiles, which, combined with a cyberattack capability and systems for damaging or destroying U.S. satellites, could push the United States out of the western Pacific. This would complicate any effort by the United States to intervene in the event Beijing decided to use force against Taiwan, the semi-autonomous democracy that Beijing views as a renegade province that must eventually return to the communist fold. [Source: The Associated Press | Robert Burns (Opinion) | March 1, 2021 ++]

Car Dependability

Brands That Rate Highest in the U.S.

Cars are becoming more dependable overall, and according to J.D. Power one luxury car brand leads the pack in terms of reliability. J.D. Power says Lexus is the most dependable brand overall, and the most reliable among luxury car brands in its 2021 U.S. Vehicle Dependability Study. Meanwhile, Kia earns the top ranking among mass-market brands. Kia is followed by Toyota, which is a sister brand of Lexus. Both are owned by Toyota Motor Corp (<https://www.jdpower.com/cars/rankings>). In compiling its rankings,

J.D. Power looked at the number of problems per 100 vehicles that original owners of 3-year-old vehicles experienced over 12 months. The lower the score, the higher the dependability. The study looked at 177 specific problems grouped into eight major vehicle categories:

- Audio/communication/entertainment/navigation
- Engine/transmission
- Exterior
- Interior
- Features/controls/displays
- Driving experience
- Heating, ventilation and air conditioning
- Seats

Based on the data in the above categories, the 10 most dependable brands and their scores are:

- Lexus — 81
- Porsche — 86
- Kia — 97
- Toyota — 98
- Buick — 100
- Cadillac — 100
- Hyundai — 101
- Genesis — 102
- Lincoln — 106
- Acura — 108
- BMW — 108

The average score among all vehicles was 121. Overall, vehicle dependability reached a record high in the 32-year history of the survey. Owner-cited problems dropped 10% from a year ago. J.D. Power noted that the rate of improvement was sharply higher than in the previous two years. Korean and Japanese brands are especially dependable, with three Korean brands — Kia, Hyundai and Genesis — excelling.

However, the news wasn't all good. In an announcement, Dave Sargent, J.D. Power's vice president of global automotive, says: "Most owners aren't experiencing their vehicles breaking down or falling apart but, for many, vehicle technology continues to function poorly or inconsistently. If an owner can't rely on a system to work as they expect, it is also considered a lack of dependability." In addition, trucks and SUVs tend to lag cars in terms of dependability — a significant finding, given that trucks and SUVs make up about 80% of retail sales each month, J.D. Power says. The average dependability score among trucks is 130, and that of SUVs is 122, compared with an average of 111 for cars.

All J.D. Power rankings are powered by VIN verified vehicle owners. Their method of ranking can be seen at <https://www.jdpower.com/ratings-methodology>. Bear in mind that 'Dependability' is just one of the variables that should be considered when thinking of acquiring a vehicle. J.D. Power's website is a useful tool in comparing them. Especially since car dealers have stopped providing potential customers with brochures on vehicles they are interested in. They will only refer customers to check out each car's

website which are only designed to sell cars vice compare them. [Source: MoneyTalksNews | Chris Kissell | February 24, 2021 ++]

News of the Weird

MAR 01 thru 15, 2021

Misinformed – Authorities in Essex County, England, received a tip on 16 JAN and arrived at the Freemasons' Saxon Hall expecting to put an end to the illegal "rave" reported to be happening there, but instead of loud music and wild teenagers, officers found old people lining up to get their COVID-19 vaccines, Echo News reported. "Grumpy old men and grumpy old women were in abundance," confirmed Dennis Baum, chairman of the hall, with "wheelchairs, Zimmer frames and walking sticks." Baum said things got testy when the vaccine was late arriving: "It was absolute chaos ... The car park became chock a block with 80-year-old-plus drivers." Police remained to offer their assistance with the traffic. [Echo News, 1/19/20]

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New Things to Worry About – Bradford Gauthier of Worcester, Massachusetts, had a bit of trouble swallowing when he woke up on Feb. 2, but he went about his day after drinking some water. Later, "I tried to drink a glass of water again and couldn't," he said, and that's when he realized one of the AirPods he sleeps with at night was missing and "felt a distinct blockage in the center of my chest," he said. KVEO reported that it didn't take doctors in the emergency room long to discover the AirPod lodged in Gauthier's esophagus. An emergency endoscopy removed it and Gauthier went home feeling much better. [KVEO via WWLP, 2/4/2021]

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Keystone Car Chase – In the wee hours of 2 JAN, police in Bellevue, Washington, spotted a car running a red light, so they ran the tag and discovered the car was reported stolen. The driver failed to yield when officers attempted a traffic stop, KOMO-TV reported, but a mechanical problem prevented the vehicle from exceeding 25 mph. The driver also observed all traffic laws as the pursuit continued for about a mile and a half until the vehicle burst into flames and became fully engulfed. The suspect male driver fled into a nearby nature park and escaped; a female passenger was detained by police and taken into custody. [KOMO-TV, 2/2/2021]

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State of the Union – Instagramer Matt Shirley of Los Angeles conducted an informal survey among his more than 300,000 followers, asking them which state they hate most, the Asbury Park Press reported Jan. 21, and from the 2,500 responses, he determined that, among the expected regional rivalries, New Jersey hates every other state and Florida hates ... Florida. The Sunshine State was the only one to choose itself as most-hated, with four-fifths of respondents agreeing. "I live in Florida, have my whole life, and would not hesitate to unironically put that as my answer," one survey participant wrote. [Asbury Park Press, 1/21/2021]

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Quick Thinking – An unnamed maskless woman waiting in line at a Pick 'n' Pay supermarket in South Africa was caught on cellphone video being confronted by a store guard who demanded she put on a mask or be thrown out of the store. On the video, she is next seen reaching up under her dress, pulling out her underwear -- a black thong -- and placing it on her face, the New York Post reported. Witnesses were mixed in their reaction. "Good lord," one shopper was heard saying. "Brilliant," said another. [New York Post, 2/26/2021]

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Oops! – Federal Judge Jesse M. Furman ruled in U.S. District Court in Manhattan on 16 FEB that Citigroup could not expect to receive repayment of nearly \$500 million of the \$900 million it mistakenly wired to a group of lenders last year after a contractor checked the wrong box on a digital payment form. Intending to make only an interest payment to the lenders on behalf of its client Revlon, Citi instead wired payment in full for the entire loan, and after realizing its error, asked for the money back, but some of the lenders refused, according to The New York Times. Judge Furman found that the lenders were justified in assuming the payment had been intentional. "To believe that Citibank, one of the most sophisticated financial institutions in the world, had made a mistake ... to the tune of nearly \$1 billion, would have been borderline irrational," he said in his ruling. Citi vowed to appeal. [New York Times, 2/16/2021]

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What Could Go Wrong? – Alexandr Kudlay, 33, and Viktoria Pustovitova, 28, of Kharkiv, Ukraine, are experimenting with a new way to preserve their on-and-off relationship: On Valentine's Day, they handcuffed themselves together and have vowed to stay that way for three months. "We used to break up once or twice a week," Kudlay told Reuters, but now when they disagree, "we simply stop talking instead of packing up our things and walking away." They take turns taking showers and give each other privacy in the bathroom by standing outside with one hand inside. [Reuters, 3/11/2021] [

[Source: <https://www.uexpress.com/news-of-the-weird> | March 15, 2021 ++]

Have You Heard or Seen?

Military Wife | Satirical Cartoons | Potpourri #2

Military Wife

Your life is filled with unexpected surprises each and every step of the way. Before becoming a military wife, these are 47 things you probably never thought about...

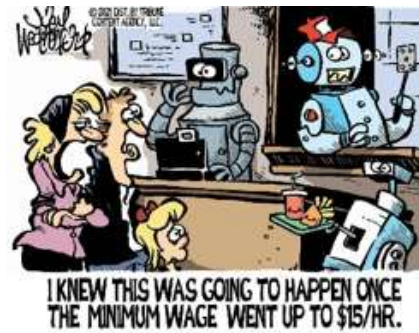
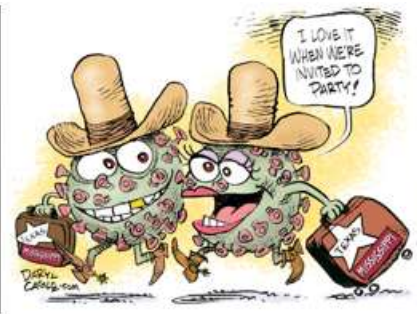
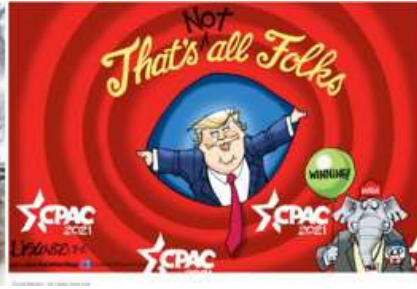
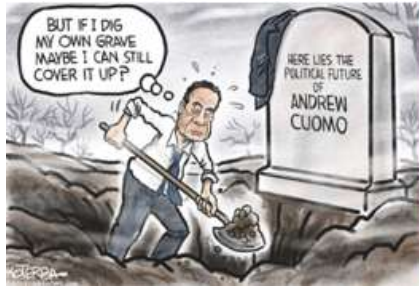
- The first deployment is a brutal shock to the system.
- Each subsequent deployment or separation will turn you into a bag of nerves, despite adequate planning, prep and support.
- Deployments don't get easier, you simply gain more tools to cope with deployment separations.
- You will spend nearly the entire time at your current duty station speculating about where you will go next.
- Someone will ask for your address history and you will nearly pass out.
- Your ID card will become an extension of your body. Without it, you'll feel lost.

- At some point, you'll get a citation for not pulling your weeds, cutting your grass or leaving a stroller outside your door when living on base housing.
- Learning acronyms and abbreviations will become your second language.
- Some duty stations will feel like the worst place EVER, right until you meet your BFF...two months before your rotation date.
- Patriotism will root itself deep into your heart.
- Getting your taxes done at the base tax center will be the scariest thing you do all year.
- You will travel insane distances to see your friends and family back home.
- On top of that, you'll drive 8 hours to see your service member for 3 hours and this will seem normal.
- You'll spend the majority of your time as a military spouse either unemployed or underemployed.
- People will say a lot of silly things to you like...“I could never do what you do.” And you will find a way to answer with grace and tact.
- Homecoming will feel like falling in love on a blind date. First comes the honeymoon phase, and then it just gets awkward.
- You'll make a plan only to make a new plan over and over again.
- Something will always break down during deployment. Always.
- At some point, you will feel lonely and wonder what in the world you are doing with your life.
- Military life will take you to the highest of highs and lowest of lows emotionally.
- Your ability to handle tough situations will rise exponentially.
- Attending the annual military ball will feel like prom...for adults.
- PCS stickers will remain on your furniture indefinitely. They're everywhere!
- Something extraordinarily important to you will receive major damage during a PCS move or it will get lost completely.
- You will try to explain your life as a military wife to a civilian and they won't get it.
- The family readiness group is going to help you when you least expect it.
- Any savings you get from the commissary will get cancelled out by all the rotten produce they sell you.
- Moving overseas will give you a panic attack, but then you'll do it and actually love it.
- Having a pet will complicate your life ...from finding a pet-friendly home to securing a safe place to kennel your fur baby.
- Finding a homecoming outfit will take an ungodly amount of time.
- Upon arriving to the military base gate, you'll either forget your ID card completely or you'll hand them a credit card.
- The number of long-distance friendships you maintain will far exceed the number of friends living in your current duty station.
- Determining the perfect time to start a family will feel like advanced college calculus.
- Talking about possible funeral arrangements, living wills and military widow death benefits will happen early in your relationship.
- You'll get pregnant and he'll announce he's leaving on deployment...right before your due date.
- Military gear will take over your entire home before and after every deployment.
- People you barely know in the military community will do extraordinary things for you at the drop of a hat.

- Your heart will feel an overwhelming sense of pride each time someone thanks your service member for his sacrifice and service.
- Amazing friendships doesn't even begin to describe the relationships you will form with other spouses.
- Taking calls at 3 am from halfway around the world will seem normal.
- After living in the same place for 3 years, you'll be itching to move again.
- You'll have a good deployment meltdown at least once every deployment.
- Reinventing yourself will become an annual thing.
- Hearing gunshots and bombs won't phase you even a little bit.
- Resilience, strength and courage will become the core of who you are as a person.
- Your military marriage will grow apart and back together over and over again, and it will turn you into one helluva strong couple.
- It'll be hard, challenging, make you want to quit and piss you off royally, but in the end, you will be so glad you did it.

Satirical Cartoons





Potpourri #2

A husband, for their 10 year anniversary, bought his wife a map of the world. He wrapped it up in a box and attached a card. On the card it said, “Throw his dart at this map and wherever it lands is where I am taking you”. He’d been saving up money for close to 2 years now because they had never been on a honeymoon. He then put a dart in his wife’s hand. She was so excited and nervous. She said I hope it lands on Ireland. She finally threw the dart. He was happy to announce this October they will be spending 2 wonderful weeks beside the baseboard in the kitchen.

-o-o-O-o-o-

A couple was having dinner one evening when the husband reached across the table, took his wife's hand, and said, "Beth, soon we will be married for 30 years, and there's something I have to know. In all these 30 years have you ever been unfaithful to me?"

Beth replied, "Well Charles, I have to be honest with you. Yes, I've been unfaithful to you three times these 30 years, but always for a good reason." Charles was obviously hurt by his wife's confession but said, "I never suspected. Can you tell me what you mean by good reasons?"

Beth said, "The very first time was shortly after we married, and we were about to lose our little house because we couldn't pay the mortgage. Do you remember that one evening I went to see the banker and the next day he notified you that the loan would be extended. Well I did what I had to do." Charles recalled the visit to the banker and said, "I can forgive you for that. You saved our home, but what about the second time?"

Beth answered, "And do you remember when you were so sick, but we didn't have the money to pay for the heart surgery you needed?" Well, I went to see you doctor one night and, if you recall, he did the surgery at no charge. I did what I had to do." "I recall that", he said. "And you did it to save my life so of course I can forgive you for that. Now tell me about the third time."

"All Right, Beth said. "So do you remember when you ran for President of the golf club, and you needed 73 more votes?"

-o-o-O-o-o-

A vet goes into the U.S. Postal service to apply for a job. The interviewer asks him, "Are you allergic to anything?" He replies, "Caffeine. I can't drink coffee."

Okay. Have you been in in the military service? He says. "Yes. I was in Afghanistan for one tour." The interviewer says, "That will give you 5 extra points toward employment." Then he asks, "Are you disabled in any way?" The vet says, "Yes. A bomb exploded near me and I lost both my testicles."

The interviewer grimaces and then says, "Disabled in your country's service! Well that qualifies you more extra bonus points. Okay." Looking at the regulations you have enough points for me to hire you tight now. Our normal working hours are 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM. You can start tomorrow at 10:00 AM.

The vet is puzzled and asks, "If the work hours are from 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM, why don't you want me here till 10:00 AM?"

"This is a government job," the interviewer says. "For the first two hours we just stand around drinking coffee and scratching our balls. No point in you coming in for that."

-o-o-O-o-o-

A pastor dies and is waiting in line at the Pearly Gates. Ahead of him is a fellow who's dressed in sunglasses, a loud shirt, leather jacket, and jeans. Saint Peter addresses him, 'Who are you, so that I may know whether or not to admit you to the Kingdom of Heaven?' The fellow replies, 'I'm Jack, retired pilot from Houston.'

Saint Peter consults his list. He smiles and say to the pilot, "Take this silken robe and golden staff and enter the Kingdom. The pilot goes into Heaven with his robe and staff.

Next, it's the pastors turn. He stands erect and booms out, 'I am Bob, Pastor for the last 43 years.' Saint Peter consults his list. He says to the Bob, 'Take this cotton robe and wooden staff and enter the Kingdom.'

'Just a minute,' says the Bob. 'That man was a pilot and he gets a silken robe and golden staff and I get only cotton and wood. How can this be?' 'Up here – we go by results,' say Saint Peter. 'When you preached – people slept. When he flew, people prayed.'

-o-o-O-o-o-

A flat chested young lady read an article in a magazine that stated Dr. Bumbutu in Africa could enlarge breasts without surgery. So she decided to go see Dr. Bumbutu to see if he could help her

Dr. Bumbutu advise her, "Every day after you shower, rub your chest and chant, "Scooby doobie doobies. I want bigger chest". She did this faithfully for several months and to her utter amazement she grew to a terrific D-cup rack.

One morning when she was running late, she got on a bus and in a panic realized she had forgotten her morning ritual. Frightened she might lose her progress if she didn't recite the little rhyme, she stood right there in the middle aisle of the bus, closed her eyes and said, "Scooby doobie doobies. I want bigger chest".

A guy sitting nearby looked at her and said, "Are you a patient of Dr. Bumbutu?" She responded, "Yes I am ... how did you know?" He winked and whispered, "Hickory dickery dock ..."

-o-o-O-o-o-

A 70-year old woman chose to remain overnight at a costly hotel as a treat for her birthday. The following morning she was appalled when the desk clerk gave her a bill for \$250.000. She requested to know why the charge was so high. "It's a nice hotel, but the rooms certainly aren't worth \$250.000 for just an overnight stay! I didn't; even have breakfast," she told the clerk.

The clerk clarified that \$250.000 is the standard rate. At that point, the older lady insisted on talking with the manager. The manager showed up and explained that the hotel "has an Olympic-sized swimming pool and a huge conference center which are available for use.

"But I didn't use them," the old woman said. "Well, they are here, and you could have," he said. The manager proceeded with that she could have likewise have seen one of the in-hotel shows for which the hotel is famous. "We have the best entertainers from the world over performing here," he said. "But I didn't go to any of those shows," she said. The manager replied, "Well, we have them, and you could have."

Regardless of what facility he recommended, the older lady would just answer, "But I did' use it!" The manager then countered with his standard reaction. After several minutes of contending with him, she chose to pay. The manager was shocked when she gave the check to him. "But madam, this check is only for \$50.00," he said.

That is right. I charge you \$200.00 or sleeping with me," the old lady replied. But I didn't the manager shouted. "Well, too bad. I was here and you could have."

-o-o-O-o-o-

A mother-in-law stopped by expectantly at her newly married son's house. She knocks on the door, then immediately walks in. She is shocked to see her daughter-in-law lying on the couch, totally naked.

What are you doing?" She asked. "I'm waiting for Jeff to come home from work," the daughter-in-law answered. "But your naked!" the mother-in-law exclaimed. "This is my love dress," the daughter-in-law explained. "Love dress? But your naked!" she says. "Jeff loves me to wear this dress! It makes him happy and it makes me happy."

The mother-in-law on the way home thought about the love dress. When she got home she undressed, showered, put on her best perfume and expectantly waited for her husband, lying provocatively on the couch.

Finally her husband came home. He walked in and saw her naked. "What are you doing?" he asked. "This is my love dress" she replied. Needs ironing" he says. "What's for dinner?"

Thought of the Week

"Life is like a sewer... what you get out of it depends on what you put into it."

--- Tom Lehrer

-o-o-O-o-o-

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