

The Elks Government Relations Report

Items of Interest from the Congress, State Legislatures and the Courts

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The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks

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Congress Still Deadlocked As Holiday Season Looms

Congress returned for a year-end session with little hope for enacting major must-pass legislation.

Already off the table until next year are the farm bill, another attempt at extending children's health insurance, trade deals with Colombia and South Korea and renewing No Child Left Behind.

Three months into the fiscal year, most appropriations bills still await Senate approval, then conferences to iron out differences with the House. Most of the pending bills call for more government spending, action that means presidential vetoes. The unique congressional invention—another continuing resolution to keep the government operating at last year's spending rate—is a near-certainly.

The clock is also ticking for putting a temporary patch on the alternative minimum tax, a law originally designed to catch a handful of wealthy tax evaders that now threatens to hit 23 million middle-class families with a big tax increase next year.

But the biggest issue continues to be funding for the war. Democrats are divided over whether to provide a \$50 billion "bridge" fund and their desire to put a withdrawal timeline into the funding legislation. The fight over full-funding the price tag of \$200 billion is an item for next year as well.

Delay until the election year is full of political peril. By the time Congress gets settled in next February, the lame-duck status of President Bush will be firmly entrenched and everyone will already know the presidential nominees.

Dr. James Peake, Retired General, Named Secretary of Veterans Affairs

Retired Lt. Gen. James Peake, the Army's former top physician and a decorated Vietnam veteran, is the new secretary of Veterans Affairs.

The first physician and the first general to head the VA, Dr. Peake retired from the Army in 2004 after serving four years as surgeon general of the U.S. Army. He replaces James Nicholson, who left the department Sept. 30.

Dr. Peake, who worked in military medicine for 40 years, helped develop several lifesaving techniques for the battlefield. As surgeon general, he commanded 50,000 medical employees and 187 army medical facilities worldwide with an operating budget of \$5 billion. He was also commander in several medical posts and is credited with improving the training and techniques of the Army medical force.

After leaving government in 2004, he was chief operating officer at Project HOPE, a nonprofit international health foundation where he helped orchestrate the use of civilian volunteers aboard the Navy Hospital Ship Mercy in response to the tsunami in Indonesia and aboard the Hospital Ship Comfort as part of the Hurricane Katrina response.

Little Talk of War on Drugs As Body Count Rises in Mexico

In the skirmishing over the budget, one of the big losers is the war on drugs.

There is not a lot of talk about drug awareness or fighting illegal drugs, but the traffickers are more than holding their own. The National Drug Intelligence Center estimates that Andean cocaine arriving in Mexico for transshipment north jumped from 220 tons in 2000 to 380 tons in 2006. Mexican heroin production went from 9 to 19 tons.

The war on drugs is also registering quite a body count in Mexico: 2,000 last year and 1,100 in the first six months of 2007, including drug dealers, police officers, journalists and bystanders. For the first time, Mexico is seriously turning to the U.S. for help and showing some resolve to take on drug trafficking, rather than dismissing it as an unsolvable problem. Although financing for drug prevention and treatment has been steadily declining since 2005, the White House request for the Iraqi war funding includes \$500 million to help train and equip Mexican law enforcement.

The New York Times likens the traffickers' firepower to what American soldiers are facing in Iraq, with little support from the puny arsenal of Mexico's police forces.

New Data Show Significant Disruption in Meth Supply

There is some good news on the drug front. Since January, the average price per pure gram of methamphetamine increased 73 percent, from \$141.42 to \$244.53, while the purity of meth dropped 31 percent. These new data from the Drug Enforcement Administration signal significant progress against meth.

The nation's drug czar, John Walters, credited state and local law enforcement, as well as the Mexican government, with much of the progress. Federal legislation set a national standard for retail distribution of products with precursor chemicals. Forty states have restricted products containing pseudoephedrine, a key meth ingredient.

Philadelphia Boy Scouts Face Loss of Building

Philadelphia's city solicitor has told the Boy Scouts of Philadelphia it must renounce its policy of excluding homosexuals or forfeit the grand, Beaux-Arts building it has rented from the city for \$1 a year since 1928.

The city has tentatively placed the market value at \$200,000 a year and has invited the Boy Scouts to remain in the nearly 100-year-old building as paying tenants.

Jeff Jubelirer, a spokesman for the Philadelphia scouting branch, the nation's third largest, said his organization has not received any complaints claiming discrimination. He added that the Boy Scouts of America stands firm on its policy.

Seven years ago, the Supreme Court held that the Scouts, as a private organization, had the right to exclude homosexuals from its ranks. Two years ago, Congress passed the Support Our Scouts Act to protect chapters from local government attempts to strip them of access to public facilities in response to the anti-homosexual policy.

VA Restores Recitation At Flag-Folding Ceremony

The Department of Veterans Affairs quickly rescinded its ban prohibiting members of volunteer honor details from reciting a popular flag-folding ritual at the gravesite of a veteran. The decision, announced by William F. Tuerk, undersecretary for memorial affairs, came after a dozen members of Congress demanded the prohibition be lifted.

The furor started in September when a VA official pulled the recitation of "The Meaning of Each Fold of an Honor Guard Funeral Flag" from ceremonies at national cemeteries. The recitation has no official status and the folding ceremony is frequently done in silence, but members of many memorial honor details often recite the meaning ascribed to the 13 folds as the flag is presented to survivors.

Each fold affirms a belief in God, America, family and traditional values. The first fold of the flag is described as a "symbol of life" and the second as a "symbol of our belief in eternal life." Other folds pay tribute to the nation, to veterans, to womanhood, to the Armed Forces, to mothers and fathers. The 11th fold glorifies "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" in the **eyes** of Jewish Americans, and the 12th glorifies "God the Father, the Son and Holy Ghost" to Christians.

The initial ban came after a complaint was filed after a reader at a California funeral misread the passage and referred to "the gods Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

The new directive, which the VA calls a clarification, says volunteer honor guards are authorized to read the so-called "13-fold" flag recitation or any comparable script. In addition, survivors of the deceased need to provide material and request it be read by the volunteer honor guards who should accept requests for recitations that reflect any or no religious traditions, on an equal basis.

"Honoring the burial wishes of veterans is one of the highest commitments for the men and women of the VA," Tuerk said. "A family may request the recitation of words to accompany the meaningful presentation of the American flag as we honor the dedication and sacrifice of their loved ones."

Legislation Calls for Guarantees Against Dunning Wounded Soldiers

Would you believe that a U.S. soldier would be asked to repay part of his enlistment bonus when he couldn't fulfill his obligation after being wounded in combat?

That's what happened to Jordan Fox, a former Army private from Pennsylvania who was dunned by the Defense Department to repay \$2,800 of his \$7,500 enlistment bonus because he completed only a year of his three-year service obligation after being wounded by a roadside explosive in Iraq. An embarrassed Pentagon claimed the request was an isolated mistake and that it would not require any wounded soldier to pay back bonuses.

Some 200 outraged members of the U.S. House want to put that policy into law and already have filed legislation called the Veterans Guaranteed Bonus Act. Lead sponsor of the bill, H.R. 3793, is Rep. Jason Altmire, D-Pa

Lodges Keep Coming Up With New Ideas for Charities

Around the country, lodges keep coming up with new ideas for raising funds to support a wide variety of charities in their communities.

Some of the “same-old, same-old” events, such as spaghetti suppers and pig roasts, continue to work, but in order to attract new people—and new money—something different may be needed.

Lodge No. 52 in Chillicothe, Ohio, came up with a dandy: a party celebrating Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving that’s the biggest shopping day of the year. The local paper, in its story about pre-Christmas sales and the early opening hours planned for many of the big box retailers, gave the Elks’ event a plug:

“Those who venture out early Friday morning, however, may want to make some time in the afternoon to rest. That’s because the doors open at 6:30 p.m. at the Chillicothe Elks Lodge for a special “Black Friday Shop ‘Til You Drop, Then Party”. The paper noted that proceeds from the event would raise money for the Elks Youth Activities Committee that funds underprivileged children’s needs throughout the year.”

Holiday Season Is Special Time To Remember Newest Veterans

Ninety years ago, the Elks made a solemn pledge to never forget the nation’s veterans. At this Christmas season, the needs are greater than ever, especially for our newest veterans—those returning from multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Many lodges are hosting holiday parties with patients from VA hospitals and returning troops from Iraq and Afghanistan as special guests. And Elks are coming up with new ideas to get the community involved as well.

Arlington-Fairfax Lodge 2188 partnered with Mighty Mike’s Bar & Grill to bring 30 guests (mostly Marines) from Walter Reed Army Hospital and Bethesda Naval Hospital. The sheriff’s department of Loudon County picked up the bus at the county line and provided an escort to the restaurant, where a ladder truck from the volunteer fire department provided a welcome with lights flashing and sirens going full blast.

“It was very sobering to see that most of the servicemen were amputees,” said Tom Ackman, a member of the Elks Honor Guard that did a brief Presentation of the Colors with “Taps” as the guests arrived and posted the Colors for the rest of the evening.

“Several of the guys were not even old enough to have a beer,” added Ackman. “God bless ‘em all.”

From the nation’s capital—best wishes to all the Elks and their families for a very Merry Christmas and good health and happiness in the New Year.



Send information for *The Elks Government Relations Report* to: Neal Gregory,
The Gregory Company, 151 North Carolina Ave., SE, Washington, DC 20003
Tel: (202) 544-8177. Fax: (775) 205-2501. E-mail: nealgregory@yahoo.com
