

Jenkins: It's obscene to balance budget on backs of vets

By PAUL JENKINS
COMMENT

Published: March 3rd, 2012 10:04 PM
Last Modified: March 3rd, 2012 10:59 PM

I knew this guy in college. He had just returned from Vietnam, or, more accurately, his long, painful hospital stay after Vietnam. Long hair. Bushy beard. A grunt, he had lost his right leg just below the knee and carried scars and bits of jagged metal in his body.

A booby trap. He said he did not remember much. A drizzly day. A flash. Face-down in the muck. Floating. A buddy screaming at him to hang on. A Huey's blood-slippery floor. His wife told quite a different story. She said he relived it every night, every second, in every night terror. She said it in a whisper.

It was easy to admire him. An "A" student, a workout nut, a skydiver. He wanted me to join him, but, really, there is no reason to leave a perfectly good airplane. There was not much, if anything, he could not do, would not try.

But there was the pain. From time to time, he would check in with the Veterans Administration so doctors could push and poke and cut to remove jagged fragments he still carried, or adjust his prosthetic leg.

"At least," he grimaced after a trip to the VA, "they'll take care of this for the rest of my life." Then, he burst out laughing. He already had figured it out.

I thought of him when the Obama administration, as part of \$487 billion in Pentagon cuts, announced it wants to jack up the amount military families and retirees pay for health care. The plan -- sleep well, America -- calls for unionized civilian defense workers' benefits to remain untouched.

The Washington Free Beacon, edited by the Washington Time's Bill Gertz, says the plan, for most of its savings, targets under-65 and Medicare-eligible military retirees through a tiered increase in annual Tricare premiums -- 30 percent to 78 percent the first year -- to

be based on annual retirement pay. In the next five years it imposes increases up to 345 percent. A retired Army colonel with a family, now paying \$460 annually for health care, will pay \$2,048, Gertz reported. The new plan has active duty personnel paying increased co-payments for pharmaceuticals and it eliminates incentives for generic drugs.

Congress could choke on this needs-based mess. While the House and Senate are anxious to shirk their oversight duties and wear fiscal blinders to enrich their pals, this kind of thing can come back to bite. Even some on the left get it -- kinda.

With this nation's wanton government waste, the administration's plan is obscene. The Government Accountability Office routinely reports myriad federal program overlaps and unnecessary duplication that cost tens, if not hundreds, of billions. The waste is so overwhelming it is difficult to calculate. There is everything from \$175,000 for a study on cocaine and the risky sex habits of quail, to \$10 million to export "Sesame Street" to Pakistan, to \$120 million in government benefits to dead people. The list is endless, but, yet, some are eager to begin balancing the books on the backs of our military.

The truth is, we have more than enough to keep our promise to the military and their families; a promise we must keep. We send them to the God-forsaken back alleys of the world. We pay them squat. We talk the talk; they and theirs get to walk the talk. We tell them: If you will offer us your lives, and put your future in doubt, we will take care of you. That's the agreement. It should not, for crying out loud, be like doing business with a credit card company, where the deal changes and you have no say.

The disgrace is that any on-duty military, or wounded or disabled veterans or retirees must pay a single, red cent for medical care. When they raised their right hand to God, they and theirs earned it forever. If need be, cut benefits to the half of this nation that contributes nothing.

My buddy all those years ago knew not to trust a promise. I thought he was wrong.

It is to our everlasting shame that he was right.

Paul Jenkins is editor of the [AnchorageDailyPlanet.com](http://www.adn.com).

Read more here: <http://www.adn.com/2012/03/03/2350482/its-obscene-to-balance-budget.html#storylink=cpy>

