

National Legislative Division Weekly

CONGRESS

Tuesday's State of the Union Address was marked by a bipartisan standing ovation when President Biden declared that Social Security and Medicare are "off the table" in negotiations on raising the debt limit. "We will not cut Social Security; we will not cut Medicare," he proclaimed as just about every lawmaker stood and applauded. President Biden concluded that section of the speech calling on Congress to "sit down together and negotiate."

The dramatic moments occurred despite House Speaker McCarthy (R-CA) previously saying both programs will not be cut. McCarthy says he has also told the President that taxes cannot be raised as part of the debt ceiling negotiations.

In the search to reduce federal spending, the military also has strong support for ongoing robust funding. McCarthy told reporters this week "we will preserve our ability to defend this nation against threats abroad." Senate Armed Services Committee chair Sen. Reed (D-RI), on Tuesday, said there are likely areas within the Department of Defense (DoD) where savings could be found, including the potential of infrastructure changes. However, Reed does not see much bipartisan support for efforts by some House Republicans to cap federal spending at FY22 levels, especially when it comes to national security.

Under the new Republican rules, witnesses may no longer testify before committees remotely. All federal government witnesses must appear in person. Committee chairs may request written permission from Majority Leader Scalise (R-LA) to allow non-government witnesses to appear remotely in cases of "extreme hardship or other exceptional circumstances."

At its organizational meeting, House Veterans Affairs Committee chair Rep. Bost (R-IL) made clear his intention to follow those rules. Ranking member Rep. Takano (D-CA) proposed an amendment to the committee rules that would allow for remote witnesses. Takano pointed out the wide variety of witnesses who were able to testify before the committee remotely for whom in-person appearances would have been extremely difficult. This included disabled veterans and advocates in remote areas. Bost opposed the rule, since he is supposed to be the one to decide when to request a waiver. Takano's amendment, Bost said, would supersede the chair's authority. Takano's amendment failed.

Bost, this week, introduced [HR 754](#), The Modernizing Veterans' Healthcare Eligibility Act. This legislation creates a bipartisan commission to consider how to simplify eligibility processes for future veterans. In 2015, the Commission on Care recommended that such a panel be convened to examine eligibility structure and to recommend changes. At that time, some of the discussions focused on encouraging veterans, when possible, to get better rather than rely upon VA disability payments for a lifetime.

HR 754, as of Thursday afternoon, has no cosponsors. However, by introducing it, Bost is sending a message that this will be one of his top priorities in the 118th Congress. Bost will also be pressing the Department to speed up improvements to the Oracle Cerner electronic health record (EHR) and to streamline its implementation, or to simply ditch the effort altogether. Last fall, Bost made several calls for dropping the new EHR and updating VistA. Industry and VA experts say that is not a practical solution.

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The last Democratic slot on the House Armed Services Committee has been filled. Rep. Veasey (D-TX) received a waiver from leadership, on Thursday, to continue serving on that committee.

The Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) announced its subcommittee members this week. Sen. Warren (D-MA) will chair the subcommittee Personnel. On the Democratic side of the aisle, the subcommittee will consist of Sen. Blumenthal (CT); Sen. Hirono (HI); Sen. Kaine (VA); and Sen. Duckworth (IL). All of the Republicans on the Personnel Subcommittee are new to the panel: Sen. Scott (FL), who is ranking member; Sen. Rounds (SD); Sen. Sullivan (AK); and Sen. Budd (NC).

During its organizational meeting on Thursday, the SASC reported two nominations to the full Chamber for a final vote. The nominees are Dr. Radha I. Plumb to be deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, and Dr. Laura Taylor-Kale to be Assistant Secretary of Defense for Industrial Base Policy.

Congress continued to be consumed by the Chinese surveillance balloon drama. The Pentagon has confirmed that these balloons have traversed US airspace at least four times over the past six years before this latest escapade. The Chinese balloon program spans the globe, with documented flights (often after the fact) over five continents.

This led to a rarity in today's Congress: on Thursday, the House unanimously agreed upon a resolution condemning the Chinese surveillance balloon program.

The House will not be in session next week. Senate committees will conclude their organizational business meetings, and several will start holding substantive hearings. On Thursday, Joshua David Jacobs will receive a nomination hearing to become VA Under Secretary for Benefits.

2023 WASHINGTON CONFERENCE

The American Legion's Washington Conference will be back in person in 2023. This event allows our organization's leadership to meet with elected officials to discuss legislative initiatives and priorities important to Legion members and their families. It also provides a forum that allows Legionnaires to hear from senators, representatives, and officials from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) as they address our members at the conference. The Legislative Agenda is [here](#) the Hill Visit Toolkit is [here](#).

To learn more information, please click [here](#).

LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK

In an effort to recognize the weekly accomplishments of our Legionnaires, we will spotlight an individual every week. These individuals demonstrate exceptional grassroots activism by meeting with/contacting their Congressional Representative/Senator to advocate for veterans. Efforts like these truly make a difference and give veterans a voice in Congress.

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Scott Nichols, Michigan

This week, we are excited to recognize Scott Nichols from the Department of Michigan for meeting with the office of Rep. Scholten (D-MI). Mr. Nichols introduced himself as a National Legislative Council (NLC) member and let Rep. Scholten's staff know that he was The American Legion's point of contact for that district. He gave them a list of American Legion posts in the districts and provided them with the [Legislative Agenda](#) for the 118th Congress.

Thank you, Mr. Nichols!

If you have made a grassroots effort and would like to be considered for next week's "Legionnaire of the Week," please fill out the Congressional Contact Report Form [here](#). You can also email me at kisaacson@legion.org.

UPCOMING HEARINGS

- On Wednesday, February 15, the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) will hold a hearing to examine global security challenges and strategy.