MILFAM

February 2008

The Honorable Duncan Hunter
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Armed Services
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Hunter:

2008 is a crucial year for currently serving and retired military families. As we begin the new legislative year, I am writing to ask for your support on two particular priorities of great importance.

First, it is essential to avoid the Defense budget decline projected in last year's administration budget submission, regardless of what decisions might be made on troop levels in Iraq. We must not fall victim to the peace dividend mentality that generated the Defense budget declines of the 1990s and left the nation inadequately prepared for post-2001 wartime requirements.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has stated that the Defense budget should be sustained at least at 4 percent of GDP, and I strongly support that goal. Today's force levels clearly are inadequate to meet current deployment requirements, forcing our active duty, Guard, and Reserve members and their families to bear an excessive burden of family separations. We must follow through with planned increases in ground forces, whether we can reduce our forces in Iraq or not. Similarly, years of war have worn out weapons and equipment that must now be replaced and modernized. These and other requirements will take a great deal of money, but there can be no higher priority than ensuring readiness for any potential future contingencies.

Second, I urge you to continue resisting pressures to impose disproportional TRICARE fee increases for military retirees. Focusing only on retirees' cash fees ignores that they already paid far greater up-front, in-kind premiums for their health care than any civilian — through decades of family sacrifices and hardships. Military health and retirement benefits must be significantly better than civilian benefits, because they are the main offset to the harsh conditions of military service that few Americans are willing to accept for even a short time, let alone 20 or 30 years. These sacrifices have been highlighted dramatically over the last six years of war; it's hard to understand how military retirees could be seen as less deserving in 2007 than they were in 2001.

Military health cost growth was hardly unplanned, unexpected, or beneficiaries' fault. It reflects Congress' decision to correct decades of wrongs imposed on older retirees who paid almost all costs from their own pockets before the enactment of TRICARE For Life. It also reflects conscious government choices. Until recently, Defense leaders made little effort to promote the mail-order pharmacy program, manage care for the chronically ill, or promote preventive medicine programs.

A key principle to avoid devaluing military members' service is that the percentage increase in their costs should not exceed that of their compensation. Reducing currently serving members' future retirement benefits can only hurt retention and readiness — just as it has in the past.

Sincerely,

John Sherlock Jr.