



## Defense Secretary Halts Forced Repayment of Enlistment Bonuses

Responding to a chorus of protests and complaints, Defense Secretary Ash Carter has suspended collection of repayments of enlistment bonuses made to members of the California National Guard. Carter has also directed that a review be made of the process that led to members of the California Guard being given bonuses to reenlist, only to have the Department of Defense demand repayment of the bonuses.



Carter called the process “unfair to service members and to taxpayers,” and said he has ordered the Defense Finance and Accounting Service to “suspend all efforts to collect reimbursement from affected California National Guard members, effective as soon as is practical.”

“This suspension,” Carter added, “will continue until I am satisfied that our process is working effectively.”

“I’m glad the Pentagon came to its senses,” House Speaker Paul Ryan said, in response to Carter’s statement. “Congress will continue to work on any reforms necessary to ensure this doesn’t happen again.”

Jeff Miller, a Florida Republican, and chairman of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee, was not as charitable as Ryan, however. He denounced Carter’s response as “weak and ham-handed,” pointing out that the moratorium will not cover potential problems outside California.

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Miller added, “Carter seems to have no plan to make those who’ve already been forced to pay back their bonuses whole, and by focusing only on the California Guard, he is ignoring what media reports indicate could be a national problem. Once again, it seems Congress will be forced to fix a problem that the Obama administration created but refuses to fully address on its own.”

During the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the California National Guard offered soldiers thousands of dollars in bonuses to entice them to re-enlist. It was at a time when the military was having difficulty meeting its recruiting goals. It is estimated that the bonuses were given to almost 10,000 soldiers, in amounts of \$15,000, or even more.

David Cloud of the *Los Angeles Times* explained the problem to National Public Radio (NPR). The bonuses were paid to encourage soldiers to sign up for another tour in the Army, generally for an additional six years. “They were being paid at a time when the California Guard desperately needed soldiers to fill the ranks of units going to Iraq. So they were more generous than usual.”

Unfortunately, many soldiers given bonuses did not qualify under the rules used at the time. Then, many years later, the Pentagon conducted audits and demanded the soldiers who received the payments pay them back — with interest.

“This story has made my blood boil,” said Bill Hahn, vice president for communications with The John



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Birch Society (parent organization of *The New American* magazine), making specific reference to a woman — a master sergeant — who went to Afghanistan after getting a \$15,000 bonus. Susan Haley's entire family served in the Army, and she had served 26 years in the military herself. After all of that, she received notice — while caring for her son, another soldier who had lost his leg in Afghanistan — that she owed thousands of dollars to the Pentagon.

"I feel totally betrayed," said Sergeant Haley, a native of Los Angeles. Haley is presently sending the Pentagon \$650 each month — a quarter of her family's income. Haley is worried that she will have to sell their home to repay the bonuses. "They'll get their money, but I want those years back," Haley said, referring to the additional six years she spent in the military as a consequence of the bonus she is now forced to repay.

A former Army captain, Christopher Van Meter, expressed similar sentiments: "People like me just got screwed. These bonuses were used to keep people in." Van Meter has been forced to refinance his home mortgage to pay the \$25,000 in re-enlistment bonuses the Army insists he should not have received. During the extra time he spent in the service, he was thrown from an armored vehicle turret, after the vehicle detonated a buried roadside bomb. He received a Purple Heart for his injuries.

Robert Richmond, an Army sergeant, re-enlisted for \$15,000 as a special forces soldier. In 2007, his company was deployed to Hillah, an Iraqi town 60 miles south of Baghdad. In this area — known as the "Triangle of Death" — a roadside bomb exploded, leaving him with permanent injuries to his back and his brain.

With the \$15,000 unpaid "debt" on his credit report, he was turned down for a home loan in Texas.

The Army began to experience recruiting shortfalls during the second Bush administration and the two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, forcing the Pentagon to resort to the most generous re-enlistment incentives in history. The recruiting and re-enlistment difficulties have continued into the Obama administration, causing some to address causes for the problem, and others to offer solutions.

National Guard units, such as those in California, have been activated more and more frequently in recent years, as the Pentagon has faced difficulty raising enough troops in the regular Army to handle the frequent overseas deployments in the administrations of George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. This in turn has led to more difficulty in filling the ranks of the various state units of the National Guard across the country.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are obvious reasons for the reluctance of many to join the national armed forces or the National Guard units. But with the increasing political correctness of the armed forces (with training in such morale-damaging classes as "White Privilege," the inclusion of women in combat roles and the lowering of physical standards to accommodate them, the push to allow for homosexual, bisexual, and transgendered soldiers, and the like) thousands more soldiers have opted for a different career.

With difficulties in raising enough soldiers through recruitment, some have advocated a return to the military draft. The draft ended in 1973, but at the urging of President Jimmy Carter, draft registration was reinstated in 1980. This became a minor issue in the presidential campaign of 1980, with Governor Ronald Reagan speaking out in opposition to draft registration. Since that time, there has been insufficient national support for reinstating the draft. But with the decline in recruitment, supporters of the draft have blamed the all-volunteer force.

If the country were to return to the draft, the question of whether women should be included in any



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conscription law would be raised. Recently, the U.S. Senate voted to include women in draft registration, but the Republican-led House of Representatives balked, narrowly defeating the effort by 217-203.

Presently, men must sign up for the draft within 30 days of turning 18. But with falling numbers of young men willing to join today's military forces, for whatever reason, expect increasing pressure to add women to the draft registration rolls.

In 1940, on the eve of a presidential election, President Franklin D. Roosevelt famously said, "I say to you again, and again, and again — your sons will never be sent to fight in a foreign war." With the inclusion of young women in both the draft and combat, perhaps this should be updated to "Your sons and your daughters will never be sent to fight in a foreign war — but if they are, expect us to ask for their bonuses back."



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