

## An Interview with

# The Honorable Duncan Hunter Chairman, House Armed Services Committee

**NRA:** Your first assignment in Congress after being elected in 1980 was to the House Armed Services Committee, where you continue to serve today as Chairman. What are your responsibilities as Chairman?

**Hunter:** As an authorizing committee, we oversee all aspects of uniform service and that includes all of what I call the “people” issues – pay, end-strength, bonus, recruitment, retention and all of the quality-of-life issues that attend the personnel of the armed forces. These include family housing, health care, and all the other amenities. And then, we also have the responsibility for authorizing the package that equips and maintains the armed services. Basically, it carries out the constitutional responsibility that Congress has to raise and maintain a military. That includes, of course, all of the equipment – planes, ships, tanks – everything from soup to nuts, the small systems to the biggest systems. We also have a responsibility to maintain the strategic arsenal and ensure that it is in good repair, reliable, and ready. And, finally, we have the obligation to maintain the base structure throughout the United States and around the world. The full package of legislation is in excess of \$420 billion this year for the defense function of the U.S. Government.

**NRA:** In working for passage of the RONALD W. REAGAN NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT FOR FISCAL YEAR 2005, you said on the floor, “We have, across the board, enough personnel benefits to really justify calling this bill the bill that represents the year of the Soldier and Marine.” What personnel benefits were you talking about?

**Hunter:** What we did was to give a substantial pay increase. If you include this year’s pay increase, we will have increased military



Mrs. Lynne Hunter (right), wife of Congressman Hunter (center), christens the Littoral Surface Craft-Experimental (X-Craft), on 5 Feb. 2005. RADM Jay M. Cohen, Chief of Naval Research, looks on. Mrs. Hunter was the ship’s sponsor. Above right, Congressman and Mrs. Hunter are presented Plank Owner certificates from LCDR Brandon Bryan, USN, PCO Sea Fighter (FSF 1).

basic pay by 25 percent since 2001. We increased the family separation allowance substantially. We increased combat pay substantially. We increased the medical care that is available to that 43 percent of the force in Iraq and Afghanistan with the Guard and Reserve including substantial medical benefits before and after mobilization and deployment. We've increased massively the number of new housing units available for military families through the privatization of housing. This new program is responsible for standing up tens of thousands of new units across the country each year. And so, we have done a great deal toward increasing the benefits for members of the uniformed service and the quality of life of the family member. Beyond that, we have addressed survivor benefits for widows. We have eliminated what we called the "widow's tax" which offset their survivor benefit against Social Security at age 62. That offset is being phased out for the first time in our history. We also enacted what is known as concurrent receipt, meaning that our disabled veterans are now receiving their disability check and their retirement check with the phase-out of the so-called offset. In fact, this is something that is new in the history of the United States because there has always been an offset between the two benefits. So, we have done a great deal in terms of increased pay, housing, special pays for operations and separation from families; but we've also given unprecedented benefits in terms of the community of those who have already served – the military retirees.

**NRA:** When you talked about the privatization of military housing, I immediately thought of the tremendous success of that undertaking in New Orleans. Top-quality housing units have been built; the state has built a magnet school onboard the base; and now, one of our Corporate Associates, USAA, is giving an automobile discount to those living onboard. This is certainly a win-win for military families. And we, as an Association, truly appreciate the efforts of the committee and your personal concern for taking care of those who are serving or have served. Obviously, you feel strongly about taking care of those serving in the uniform, and I understand that your son is serving. Does he give you some inputs?

**Hunter:** My son has been to Iraq twice as a Marine artillery officer and most recently was stationed in Fallujah. He is back now at Pendleton. Whenever you have uniformed personnel in the family you get advice – unsolicited advice. But, it is very good; and it is kind of neat to have a member of the family to give you the word from the field. The problem I have is that it is coming from two directions. My dad is a Marine and my son is a Marine. And, they claim that talent skipped a generation because I was in the Army. So they both give me lots of advice.

**NRA:** Certainly, you have to be proud of your son, your dad, and your own service. Over 40 percent of the personnel in Iraq are Guardsmen or Reservists; and I know that you are concerned about their benefits and entitlements, their families, and their employers as well. Are we over-relying on the Guard and Reserve?

**Hunter:** Actually, I differ with most people who talk about the Guard and Reserve being close to the breaking point. I think the people who make up the Guard and Reserve are more resilient than the pundits make them out to be. To get your byline in the media today, you need to show a problem. It's tough to tell a success and get a good place for your story. But, the Guard and Reserve success stories. One thing that my son pointed out to me was that Guardsmen and Reservists who have a civilian occupation that is aligned with those needed in Iraq and Afghanistan were more capable than the Active services. When you have Guardsmen and Reservists in-country rebuilding the infrastructure, then electricians, plumbers, engineers, and the deliverers of service add significantly to the effort. There is such a broad array of disciplines and capabilities in the Guard and Reserve that no other Army in the world has. Literally, you get the military occupational specialties and civilian occupational specialties many of which mesh nicely with the requirements of the communities. So, the Guard and Reserve are extremely effective. I look at the Guard and Reserve participation in Iraq and Afghanistan as a success story. But obviously, the other piece of that is very important. In-country, the Active and the Reserve forces are indistinguishable.

**NRA:** Does the Laird Total Force policy referred to informally as the Abrams Doctrine need to be rethought?

**Hunter:** I think that the Total Force policy of bringing the Guard and Reserve to the fight is not only necessary but also extremely efficient. There is another aspect of that which we don't talk about a lot. That is the idea that we are citizen soldiers and that the Guard and Reserve come back to the civilian community in the United States as advocates for military service. That is of great value to our country.

**NRA:** I'm reminded of our return to the all-volunteer force in the early 1970s. President Nixon's Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force concluded that if the entry-level pay of enlisted men were raised, the recruiting organization expanded, and the conditions of service life improved, the Armed Services could attract enough volunteers to staff the active-duty strength objectives. Congress took the first step toward implementing the plan in 1972 when lawmakers raised the pay of first-term enlisted men by 61.2 percent. Do those conclusions apply equally to the situation today?

**Hunter:** When I went into the Army as a private in 1969, I was making \$89 per month. When I got out as an officer several years later, I had received significant increases. The Nixon Administration, in the last years of the Viet Nam war in the early 70's, put in some substantial increases. But, it was very necessary to come in with massive increases because of enlisted rates that hadn't risen much since World War II. So, there were huge increases required. When I came into Congress in 1980, the first thing that Ronald Reagan did, with respect to the Defense budget, was to pass a 12.6 percent pay increase. This was received with great acclaim by the folks in the uniformed services. We let pay

in real terms sag during the Clinton administration, but Congress and the Bush Administration have raised pay some 25 percent in the last four years.

**NRA:** I'm of the opinion that we have not come to grips with the costs of the all-volunteer force. We shifted in 1972, but we've never really debated the costs. It's a free marketplace for people where supply and demand determines the costs which are difficult to predict and measure.

**Hunter:** Sure.

**NRA:** Where does the gap between military and civilian pay stand today?

**Hunter:** It was in the high double digits, somewhere between 12-14 percent, at the end of the Clinton Administration. We've now gotten that down to 5.1 percent in the FY-05 Defense bill.

**NRA:** Many complain that the cost of personnel is too high. What do you say to them?

**Hunter:** The answer is that you have to have two major components to field an effective force. One is quality people, and the second is quality equipment. And, those two requirements should not conflict! You don't do a Soldier, Sailor, Airman, or Marine any favors by giving them good pay and an inferior piece of equipment whether it is a tank, truck, ship, or aircraft. So, modernization should not compete against the personnel accounts. What that means, in short, is that you need to maintain a robust top line. And, moving that top line is a key thing. This President has moved the top line fairly substantially this year – about \$17B more than we spent last year. We're spending approximately about 3.6 percent of Gross Domestic Product on defense right now, not counting operational costs for major theatres. Under Kennedy, we spent nine percent of GDP on defense; under Reagan, we spent six percent. Today's 3.6 percent is certainly not a historically large number. So, I think that it could easily go to 4.5 or 5 percent of GDP. That would accommodate continuing increases in the personnel accounts and a more robust modernization program.

**NRA:** In January 2002, you delivered a special report to President Bush entitled, *The Case for Rebuilding U.S. Armed Forces*. In it you said, "The Bush Administration has inherited a military that is short of ammunition, precision-guided munitions, and personnel. Equipment is often older than the young soldiers operating it, and mission-capable rates still have not climbed back to their early 1990s levels." What resulted from this report?

**Hunter:** We had good meetings with the President on defense spending. Several of the things that we pressed on, including munitions, were addressed by President Bush in a fairly robust manner. The success of the American forces in the Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns was to some degree a function of the precision technology – the ability to throw a precision system at a target and take that target out without the massive dedication of resources that was necessary in the days when we used dumb

bombs. Precision munitions are very much a part of America's force projection, and that area is one in which we spent a lot of time working with the Administration in making sure that we got to a high level and that it stayed there.

**NRA:** In July 2004, you held hearings on troop rotations in Iraq and mobilization of the Army's IRR. During those hearings, you said, "We are also concerned that insufficient force structure and manpower are leaving the services to make decisions that I liken to eating the seed corn; that is, in order to make it through today, we do things that mortgage the future." Please elaborate.

**Hunter:** The one place where you can find money readily is in the personnel accounts because they have a high spend-out rate. That is, if you cut back on ship construction, for example, you may only capture a fraction of the costs in a given year. But when you cut back on personnel accounts, like cutting end-strength, you get a 100 percent return. So, it is very attractive for some to go to the personnel accounts when they are trying to find money to make ends meet elsewhere. But, it is a dangerous exercise if you don't do what it takes to retain your quality personnel because retaining quality personnel is the key to successful operations.

**NRA:** And, that balance between people and modernization was probably partly the reason why, in December 2004, the Deputy Secretary of Defense signed a Program Budget Decision that called for reducing weapon procurement programs and, among other things, the decommissioning of an aircraft carrier. Are these actions shortsighted?

**Hunter:** Well, once again, there is top line. The question becomes how much you can afford to spend on top line. Every time I start to get frustrated with this administration in terms of its top line defense expenditures, I look at the last guy to walk out of the White House, Bill Clinton; and I realize that this President is spending \$100 billion more each year than Bill Clinton was, and I feel better about it. We're still on the upslope in terms of rebuilding defense after the last administration, but we have a long way to go. I think it's very important that we don't compete these two dimensions of our national security apparatus – that is the personnel dimension and the modernization dimension.

**NRA:** As a percent of GDP, are we also in competition with Homeland Security?

**Hunter:** Actually not. We're down to a fairly low GDP rate, and we shouldn't be in competition. I think Americans realize since 9/11 that you don't have Social Security without homeland security. And so, the idea that 3.6 percent of the GDP imposes a burden on any other function of government should not be acceptable.

**NRA:** A Commission on the National Guard and Reserve was created in this year's NDAA. Why was that necessary?

**Hunter:** It is always good to have perspective on this very important part of the Total Force. We want actionable feedback with respect to deployments and their effect on careers, on stability of our Guardsmen and Reservists' career paths on the civilian



ADM Clark (left), Chief of Naval Operations; Hon. Gordon England (center), Secretary of the Navy; and Gen. Hagee, Marine Corps Commandant, testify before Chairman Hunter and other members of the House Armed Services Committee, on 17 Feb. 2005.

side, on family separation, and on the training requirements. One aspect of the Guard and Reserve not being used as extensively in the past as they are now is that, while we heard complaints they weren't being used to the same degree as the Active force, they felt they were not treated as well as the Active force. There's good news now in that the Guard and Reserve are being used, and they are part of the Total Force. And, it is difficult to distinguish between them and the Active force. We've been working hard to address the special issues of the Guard and Reserve: separation issues, the job stability issues, and the equipment and retention issues. So, it is important as we brought the Guard and Reserve into this new role, into a much more robust role in the Total Force, that we look very carefully at their needs.

**NRA:** Do you see the Commission on the Guard and Reserve Force providing sustainable recommendations that can be implemented by Congress?

**Hunter:** Certainly. But, Congress has been pretty responsive to the Guard and Reserve. We have come up with a large medical package prior to mobilization and subsequent to mobilization. And now, they are the beneficiaries of major increases in combat pay and separation pay. Another interesting item was something I read in a newspaper recently regarding how states are treating Guardsmen and Reservists with many new benefits. So, the state governments have acknowledged the value of Guardsmen and Reservists and have begun to give them a special bonus; and that is very gratifying to see.

**NRA:** Absolutely. We're hoping that the Commission will also look at tax credits for employers because they are a significant part of the employment and use of the Guard and Reserve. And, earlier

than age 60 retirement has been introduced in both houses; and, again, we're hopeful that the Commission will provide their recommendations on it.

**Hunter:** Sure.

**NRA:** The President's Fiscal Year 2006 budget came over last week. What does it look like for the Department of Defense?

**Hunter:** I am generally pleased with the budget request. President Bush and Secretary Rumsfeld are continuing their commitment to military modernization and the well-being of our men and women in uniform. I'd like to see further increases in our procurement accounts, but it is a solid proposal and a very good starting point for Congress. I am confident that, in the end, Congress will approve a budget and supplemental that will meet the needs of our troops and that we will continue our successes in the war on terror.

**NRA:** What about the Navy's portion of that budget?

**Hunter:** From ships to aircraft, the Navy has many modernization needs; and we are working to meet them. On the personnel side, we will take care of our people – but we must find more money for modernization. When I think of force projection, I first think of the Navy and Marine Corps – the Total Force, including, of course, our Reservists. It is critical to rebuild and maintain this force. Unfortunately, we went through a procurement holiday during the Clinton years, and we are still paying the price for that.

**NRA:** Thank you for your time today, for your continued public service, and for your advocacy for a strong military.

**Hunter:** We just have to keep on working together. ↴