

Legislative Division Weekly

GRASSROOTS ACTION UPDATES

This week, we are asking Legionnaires to contact President Joe Biden to request that he issue the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Legionnaire Diane Carlson Evans for her work on the Vietnam Women's Memorial! The American Legion supports this recognition, and we appreciate Senator Tester of Montana leading the way. **We are excited to introduce to you the capability to email the White House directly and ask the President to act! Go to the [Action Center](#) to quickly email a letter of support to the White House.**

Have you had a recent meeting or phone call with your member of Congress? Report your contact today! Click [here](#) to register your Congressional contact and demonstrate the power of The American Legion advocacy in action.

The American Legion's legislative agenda for the 2nd Session of the 118th Congress. To review our priorities, you can check out our [Advocacy Toolkit](#).

HOUSE ADVANCES \$884 BILLION DEFENSE BILL

This article's original publication can be found [here](#).

The House on Wednesday night advanced an \$883.7 billion defense policy bill for fiscal 2025. It provides a 20% pay boost to junior enlisted troops while pushing back against the Defense Department's shipbuilding and Air Force procurement plans.

The Armed Services Committee voted 57-1 to advance the Servicemember Quality of Life Improvement and National Defense Authorization Act to the House floor after considering more than 700 amendments during a roughly 12-hour markup. Rep. Ro Khanna, D-Calif., cast the single vote against the legislation.

The bill adheres to the spending caps from last year's debt ceiling deal, allowing a 1% increase over the \$874.2 billion FY24 defense policy bill.

"This bill is also the product of hundreds of hours of oversight done by all members and staff over the past few months," House Armed Services Committee Chairman Mike Rogers, R-Ala., said ahead of the committee vote. "It is a good bill that will help revitalize the defense industrial base and build the ready, capable, and lethal fighting force we need to deter China and our other adversaries."

The legislation would incrementally fund a second attack submarine for FY25 against the Pentagon's wishes, block certain aircraft retirements and maintain restrictions on downsizing the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

The Navy, citing industrial base delays, only asked for one Virginia-class submarine for FY25 in a break from the two-per-year cadence. But the defense bill provides \$1 billion toward funding for the second submarine and intends to provide additional funds for the vessel in future fiscal years.

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Meanwhile, the bill would procure 58 F-35 fighter jets for FY25, 10 less than the Pentagon requested amid growing congressional frustration with manufacturer Lockheed Martin.

Rep. Seth Moulton, D-Ma., floated – then withdrew – an amendment that would have authorized the defense secretary to seize intellectual property from Lockheed Martin and open it up to competition, taking aim at the F-35's software problems.

Moulton was not able to hold a vote on the amendment after a Congressional Budget Office cost determination but that didn't stop lawmakers from excoriating Lockheed Martin.

“We all know that the F-35 program is behind schedule,” said Moulton. “It's way over budget grossly and it's not delivering the programs ready to fight that we need.”

Several Republicans, including Reps. Morgan Luttrell of Texas as well as Carlos Gimenez and Cory Mills of Florida, also said they may support Moulton's efforts in the years ahead.

But Rep. Adam Smith of Washington, the top Democrat on the committee, cautioned that “it's no small thing for the government to confiscate intellectual property.”

“In law, we would possibly have to compensate them for that, which would be really, really, really expensive,” said Smith.

Additionally, the bill would block the Air Force's effort to retire 32 Block 20 F-22 Raptors, also made by Lockheed Martin, through FY27. It would also pause the Air Force's plans to retire 26 F-15E Strike Eagles, made by Boeing.

The bill also prevents efforts to retire the B83 nuclear gravity bomb, which is at least 80 times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, and requires the military to deploy at least 400 intercontinental ballistic missiles.

It also establishes a chief talent management officer at the Pentagon to improve recruitment, retention and workforce development for military personnel and civilian employees alike.

The committee also adopted an amendment that would automatically register all male U.S. residents ages 18 to 26 into the Selective Service amid a drop in mandatory registrations from eligible individuals in recent years. The committee adopted the amendment from Rep. Chrissy Houlahan, D-Pa., by voice vote.

The committee also voted down multiple amendments. For instance, it overwhelmingly voted 46-11 against an amendment from Rep. John Garamendi, D-Calif., that would have abolished the requirement for military services and combatant commands to submit annual unfunded priorities lists to Congress.

They also struck down 48-10 an amendment from Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., that would have banned the transfer of cluster munitions to Ukraine.

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This year's committee draft of the authorization bill had a specific focus on military quality of life issues, after panel lawmakers spent the last 15 months reviewing ways to address frequent complaints among troops and family members.

"No service member should have to live in squalid conditions. No military family should have to rely on food stamps to feed their children," said Rogers. "And no one serving this country should have to wait weeks to see a doctor or a mental health specialist.

"This bill will go a long way toward fixing that."

The measure contains a dramatic overhaul of the military's pay tables, giving a pay bump of nearly 20% to junior enlisted troops next year. The move would bring almost every service member's base pay to more than \$30,000 a year, a move lawmakers hope will limit the financial strain on younger military families.

The authorization bill also includes increases to troops' housing allowances (bringing them up to 100% of regional housing costs) and expands eligibility for the military's Basic Allowance for Subsistence stipend.

And lawmakers also inserted language in the defense bill improving pay and benefits for Defense Department child care workers, to help with recruiting and retention of those posts.

Those reforms are included alongside a 4.5% pay raise for all troops next year, which would be the third consecutive year of increases of more than 4% for the military.

Not including that salary hike, the cost of the quality of life reforms total about \$4.2 billion, a significant section of the constrained authorization bill total. But supporters said the moves are needed now to ensure that the services can keep pace on recruiting and retention issues.

The Senate Armed Services Committee is scheduled to take up its version of the legislation in June.

CHINA BEGINS LARGE MILITARY EXERCISE

This article's original publication can be found [here](#).

China launched new military exercises around Taiwan, scrambling jets and sending ships out for patrols just days after the self-governing island nation swore in a new pro-U.S. president who Beijing criticized for escalating tensions in his inaugural address.

The military drills, code-named Joint Sword 2024A, will run from Thursday to Friday, according to state-run Chinese news agency Xinhua. The exercises involve the Army, Navy, Air Force and the Rocket Force, which is involved with nuclear and conventional missile management for the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

A PLA spokesperson said the drills will involve ships and aircraft around Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait.

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Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said at a press briefing Thursday that Beijing was seeking to “strongly punish” the “separatist forces.”

“All Taiwan independence separatist acts will be hit head-on by more than 1.4 billion Chinese people, and all Taiwan independence separatist forces will be hit hard in the face of the historical trend of China’s complete reunification,” Wang said, per Xinhua.

Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense condemned the new exercises as “jeopardizing peace and stability.”

“We seek no conflicts, but we will not shy away from one. We have the confidence to safeguard our national security,” the ministry wrote on social media platform X.

Taiwan’s new president, Lai Ching-te, campaigned on closer relations with the U.S., with his January victory dealing a major blow to Beijing.

The U.S. has unofficial relations with Taiwan but supports the nation with arms and has congratulated Lai on his victory.

Though his ruling government is closer to Washington, Lai is advocating to maintain the status quo of Taiwan, which means not calling for independence.

In his Monday inauguration speech, Lai hailed that the island nation “is a sovereign, independent nation in which sovereignty lies in the hands of the people.”

“The future of cross-strait relations will have a decisive impact on the world,” he said. “This means that we, who have inherited a democratic Taiwan, are pilots for peace. Our government will uphold the Four Commitments, neither yield nor provoke, and maintain the status quo.”

He also called for China to “cease their political and military intimidation against Taiwan.” China condemned the speech and called it a confession of Taiwanese independence.

ARMY VETERAN TO SERVE AS CAPITOL ARCHITECT

This article's original publication can be found [here](#).



Thomas Austin, an Army veteran and former director of engineering at Arlington National Cemetery, has been named the new architect of the Capitol and will assume the role on June 24, the congressional commission tasked with filling the position announced Wednesday.

Austin will permanently fill the role that was vacated when President Joe Biden removed J. Brett Blanton in February 2023. The architect is responsible for the maintenance, operation, development and preservation of the Capitol complex. Architects of the Capitol are appointed to serve a term of 10 years.

“The Architect of the Capitol plays a vital role in welcoming millions of visitors to our Capitol and ensuring it is a functional workplace,” the commission said in a joint statement. “Thomas Austin has managed construction projects and facilities of all sizes, maintained one of our nation’s most hallowed landmarks, and served our country in the military. We are confident that with his extensive experience, Thomas Austin will be an adept and capable Architect of the Capitol.”

Austin is currently a senior program manager for a construction consulting firm and in the past was chief of the Facility Programs Division for the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. He retired from the Army in 2023 as a colonel after serving nearly three decades in engineering and leadership roles, including overseas in Afghanistan and Iraq, according to the joint statement. He’s a licensed professional engineer and certified construction manager.

He will helm an Architect of the Capitol office that for years has been mired in controversy. An inspector general report released in 2022 found Blanton had misused his government-issued vehicle, abused his authority and wasted close to \$14,000 in taxpayer funds. Blanton remained in office for months following the report, but after a tense House Administration hearing early in the 118th Congress, was fired by Biden.

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Several other top officials were removed in the wake of Blanton's firing. And in the past year, former employees have filed a series of discrimination complaints painting a picture of what they said was a dysfunctional and hostile workplace.

Chere Rexroat, a chief engineer at the agency, stepped in as acting architect following Blanton's departure. In February, Rexroat announced she'd return to her previous role. The AOC's Chief of Operations Joseph DiPietro has stepped in as acting architect since.

Austin's appointment is the first since the passage of legislation in December that authorized a congressional commission to appoint and remove an AOC by a bipartisan, majority vote. In the past, the president appointed architects based on recommendations from Congress.

That commission included House and Senate leadership and the chairs and ranking members of the Senate Rules and Administration, House Administration and Senate and House Appropriations committees.

LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK

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.

Gene Toohey, Texas

Gene, for your steadfast advocacy of Legion priorities, we are honored to name you Legionnaire of the Week!

Gene recently met with staffers from Congressman Keith Self's office in Greenville, TX. In Gene's report, he shared that they discussed the issue of veteran patient care in the Greenville CBOC.

Thank you, Gene, for your report and the time you have dedicated to the Legion's legislative priorities.

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 us at grassroots@legion.org with the details.

LEGISLATIVE DIVISION UPDATES

LegDiv has been meeting with Congressional Staff to discuss the impacts of the newly announced Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Act and provide feedback on The American Legion support and

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recommendations for the bill. We also had meetings with the House Veterans' Affairs Committee Democrat and Republican staffers, attended an event with the Disabled Veterans of America in support of our disabled veterans, attended a Veteran employment panel, and participated in a Women Veterans' VSO working group discussion.

We conducted meetings with Congressman Adam Smith, Representative Jared Golden' and Sen Blackburn's offices to discuss pending legislation, and drafted feedback on the NDAA and MILCON/VA FY25 funding bills for the Appropriations subcommittees to review. We also worked with other divisions of The American Legion to coordinate efforts and expand the voice of Veterans in DC!

GRASSROOTS INFORMATION

Interested in what the Legion is advocating for in Congress on *The Veteran's Role in Supporting the Military*? Check out our [information paper](#) in the [Legislative Toolkit](#). This is a great starting point for a conversation with your elected officials!

As part of our ongoing Grassroots efforts, LegDiv staff is available to provide **Grassroots Training** tailored to the hosting Department's needs. If you are interested in hosting a Grassroots training event, please contact grassroots@legion.org or ejohnson@legion.org.

Register for Action Alerts today at <https://www.votervoice.net/AmericanLegion/Register>



UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

As of Friday, May 23rd, at 9:00am, the following hearings are scheduled:

June 4th, 10:15am – House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Oversight Hearing

HVAC hearings can be viewed at: [Calendar Home](#) | [House Committee on Veterans Affairs](#)

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SVAC hearings can be viewed at: [Hearings - U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs](#)

HASC hearings can be viewed at: [Hearings – House Armed Services Committee](#)

SASC hearings can be viewed at: [Hearings – U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services](#)

[View The American Legion Legislative Handbook Here](#)