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Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, D.C. 20515

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE BOB DOLE, 1ST DISTRICT, KANSAS, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON COMPENSATION AND PENSIONS OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS, MARCH 2, 1967.

REVISIONS URGED IN VETERANS' BENEFITS

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I appreciate this opportunity to present my views on legislation I have introduced relating to veterans' pensions. My initial comments are directed to H.R. 500, introduced on January 10, 1967, and H.R. 3952, introduced on January 26, 1967.

H.R. 500 provides that where the entitlement of a veteran, widow, or child to a pension from the Veterans Administration is based upon the veteran's having served in World War I, the beneficiary shall, if otherwise eligible, have the right to elect payment of pension under either the provision of Title 38, as in effect on June 30, 1960, or as amended by the Veterans' Pension Act of 1959, whichever provides the greater benefit.

H.R. 3952 would amend the United States Code, in order to increase by 20 percent the income limitations imposed by Chapter 15 of Title 38 on persons entitled to pensions thereunder.

Approximately 80 bills relating in some way to non-service pensions have been introduced and referred to your Committee. This is certainly a clear indication of the sentiment in Congress that something should be done in this area.

The average age of veterans of World War I is above 70 years, and their ranks are diminishing rapidly. Hundreds of these veterans are almost entirely dependent on this income for a living. Everyone is aware of the effects of the cruel hand of inflation on the living of those on a limited fixed income. Veterans' pensions have enjoyed no immunity from the increase in living costs, which unfortunately threaten to go even higher.

My reason for introducing H.R. 500 is that many veterans of World War I who had not reached the age of 65 on July 1, 1960, were arbitrarily forced to accept the provisions of Public Law 86-211. Under these circumstances, such veterans whose spouses passed away would have their pensions reduced considerably. Many World War Veterans feel the younger group should have the right to elect to receive benefits under whichever law would give them the higher benefits or be of the most advantage.

My objective in introducing H.R. 3952 is to rectify an injustice affecting

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approximately 20,000 veterans whose pensions have been reduced as a result of the modest social security increase voted by the 89th Congress.

Mr. Chairman, in most instances, these veterans received a social security annuity which placed them slightly under one of the income limits established by law for entitlement to a certain rate of pension. When the social security increase, though slight, was approved, it was sufficient to put the veteran in a higher income bracket, thus reducing or terminating his payments. Though the amount varied with the individual case, I understand that each of the more than 20,000 veterans concerned lost considerably more in pension than he gained in social security. In a typical case coming to my attention, the veteran received a monthly increase of \$8.00 in social security, while losing \$48.00 in veterans' pension benefits.

The Administration's proposal to increase substantially the monthly social security payments makes it imperative that action be taken to offset the adverse effect such an increase would presently have on veterans' pension benefits. H.R. 3952 would permit a modest increase in income without affecting pension entitlement. It would do this by increasing by 20 percent the income limitations for each category in Chapter 15 of Title 38, U. S. Code relating to persons entitled to pensions thereunder.

Arguments are made that during the 88th Congress a 10 percent retirement income exclusion for pension purposes was authorized and that the pensioner is receiving more in pension than he did in 1964. Nonetheless, the fact remains that pension payments for 1966 were substantially reduced from the rate received in 1965.

In addition, these veterans and their dependents, and for that matter all Americans, watch helplessly as the dollar value continues to erode. Pensioners and others on limited fixed incomes have been particularly injured by the rising cost of life's necessities. These persons, in particular, are the victims of spending policies of this Administration -- resulting inflation has been given as the basis for requested wage increases for federal employees as well as for persons employed in private industry. In the case of federal workers, Congress has recognized the need for cost-of-living adjustments and passed legislation from time to time to compensate for the rising costs of living. Congress, therefore, cannot in good conscience delay action on bills relating to liberalization of veterans' pensions.

As a disabled veteran, having served as service officer for the American Legion and V.F.W. for a number of years, I believe our primary obligation is to assist the low-income veteran, the seriously disabled, and widows and children of deceased veterans.

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I wish to express my hope the Committee will seriously consider H.R. 3309 introduced by Congressman Haley, a member of this Committee. I know of a number of veterans in my District, and other parts of Kansas, who have been denied pension benefits because of requirements that certain payments, from various sources, be considered as income under Section 521, Title 38, United States Code. H.R. 3309 would amend Section 521 of the U. S. Code to exclude from income consideration of all payment from any source when a veteran reaches age 72.

If the Committee feels H.R. 3309 goes too far, then at least Mr. Haley's suggestion could be used as a basis for revising present laws, therefore reducing discrimination against countless veterans. I would agree that benefits should be made available primarily to those in need but at the same time Congress should not penalize those veterans who, because of accident or design, may have accumulated a reasonable amount of property, or who may receive certain retirement or annuity payments, or other income, because of prior employment. With all the emphasis these days on improving standards of living in the country, and around the world, it would seem to me that our veterans of past wars should be given first consideration. It seems reasonable that income should not be a factor in determining pension eligibility after age 72 in the same manner, as income is not a factor in Social Security after age 72. I am not suggesting pension benefits be made available to so-called "wealthy" veterans, but am insisting that Congress adopt a more realistic attitude in determining eligibility.

It has always been, and still is, my contention that any Veterans' Pension Program should confer benefits on the aged, needy veterans, their widows, and children of deceased veterans. The problem in the past, and the present problem, appears to be interpretation of the word "needy", which should perhaps be changed to "deserving" to avoid the interpretation that to be eligible a veteran must be living in poverty. Specifically, I would urge and recommend that any bill reported by your Committee include the following:

1. An increase in certain income limits and pension rates for veterans and widows.
2. Elimination of the disability requirement for entitlement to pension at age 65.
3. Serious consideration given to reducing the 90-day service requirement; and
4. Elimination of all payments from any source as income when veteran reaches age 72.

Mr. Chairman, in my opinion, the least the Committee should do is report on a bill similar to H.R. 17488 of the 89th Congress which was reported unanimously by this Committee, passed the House with only two dissenting votes, and died in the Senate. In closing, I wish to express the hope that the Committee will take action to bring about these long overdue adjustments. Thank you.