

A defense/veterans wish list for the State of the Union

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No matter how much ground President Obama's annual State of the Union speech covers, the commander in chief won't be able to address every military and veterans issue that outside advocates want highlighted. Here are a few topics that key community experts would like to hear mentioned but are unlikely to make the cut.

Benjamin Friedman, defense research fellow at the Cato Institute:

After almost 15 years, can't we pay for wars at least partly through the normal appropriation process rather than a special overseas contingency operation fund? Under a normal appropriation process, assuming the budget caps stay in place, Congress would have to fund wars through offsets. That process would force more consideration of tradeoffs and greater scrutiny and oversight. In theory, Obama supports such a change, but has done nothing to make it happen. A war tax would have similar effects.

Jen Silva, strategy and innovation executive vice president at Wounded Warrior Project:

We often hear "thank you" for the service and sacrifice of our nation's wounded veterans. What we really want to hear, however, are the specifics: How will the administration prioritize the immediate and long-term needs of these wounded warriors? Will policymakers invest in research and state-of-the-art treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury? Will they step up and address gaps in women's health care for fertility issues caused by battle injuries? And will they streamline a health insurance system where many of the most severely disabled veterans pay far more than their counterparts for the care they desperately need?

Loren Thompson, defense industry consultant and analyst at the Lexington Institute:

The most important military item that will be missing from President Obama's State of the Union address will be national missile defense. The United States lacks the ability to defend itself against a large-scale nuclear attack at a time when the world's other nuclear superpower, Russia, is becoming increasingly unpredictable. Nuclear war is the only man-made threat that could destroy American civilization overnight, and yet missile defense of the homeland will receive less than 1 percent of the Pentagon's budget this year.

Phil Carter, senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security:

Defense and VA health reform belong at the top of the president's agenda but will likely not be mentioned because they are too wonky. On the defense side, too little has been done to follow up on last year's military health system review, with serious access and quality issues remaining throughout the system. On the VA side, the president has much good work to tout, but also much more to do with respect to improving access and establishing a 21st-century VA that focuses on patient outcomes and is agnostic as to whether care is provided by VA, a VA contractor, or a private-sector partner.

Justin Johnson, senior defense policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation:

The one thing that Obama should talk about, but likely won't, is increasing defense spending. Under the recent budget agreement, the base defense budget will go down by 1.2 percent in real terms from fiscal 2016 to fiscal 2017. A real cut means that force structure, modernization and readiness will all continue to be underfunded in 2017 at the same time that demand continues to increase. The budget deal level is \$22 billion below what President Obama's own plan was for fiscal 2017, but I doubt very much that he will mention this cut or do anything about it.

Bill Rausch, executive director of Got Your 6:

Given the support for veterans from the president and first lady, through efforts like Joining Forces, we expect the president to highlight major successes in employing and housing veterans over the past year. Building on this theme, we would like to see the president emphasize to the American people that veterans are leaders, team builders and problem solvers who have the unique potential to strengthen communities across the country like never before.

Byron Callan, managing director at Capital Alpha Partners:

For 2016, I'd like to see the president instruct the Department of Defense to accelerate the reintegration of its acquisition system with the rest of the U.S. technology and industrial base and demand that Congress stop blocking the department's efforts to implement sensible plans to reduce excess facilities and wasteful spending.

Joe Davis, spokesman for the Veterans of Foreign Wars:

We want the president to ensure full defense funding in support of the troops and their worldwide fight against terrorism and insurgency, and for the Department of Veterans Affairs to identify and fix what's broken, to hold employees fully accountable for their actions or inaction, and to restore the faith of veterans in their VA.

Steve Grundman, George Lund Fellow at the Atlantic Council:

The 2016-2017 budget agreement does not resolve the long-term federal fiscal outlook, and defense planners and companies should not somehow be lulled into thinking we're now suddenly in a growth market. Guidance for the 2017 defense budget is again smaller than what the administration had been planning. Consequently, our defense establishment remains in a programmatic retrenchment, and its impact, while smaller than it would have been under the strictures of the Budget Control Act, are essentially "cuts." Washington still needs to achieve a "grand bargain" that gives confidence to Americans (not to mention allies and competitors) that

our political leaders have struck the right balance of taxes and debt to responsibly finance our obligations.

Paul Rieckhoff, CEO of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America:

We call on the president to prioritize bipartisan action on behalf of female veterans. Though the quality of care and services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs needs to dramatically improve across the board, women especially need to see improvements in their standard of care

Paul Paolozzi, communications vice president at the Aerospace Industries Association:

It's vital that the commander in chief recognize that the world has become considerably less stable than when current defense budgets were put in place. Today there is more conflict — and more potential for conflict — in more different places than there was even a year ago. And our most capable potential adversaries have made huge strides in their offensive and defensive capabilities, from submarines to cyberspace. Under these circumstances, the president should be asking for more defense spending. Our armed forces must be large and capable enough to meet multiple threats in multiple environments and they must have the most modern weapons and technology we can provide.