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NEWS RELEASE

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Looking Out for Our Veterans Who Secure America's Freedoms
by Senator Larry Craig

Even as our nation is at war in Afghanistan and Iraq, I worry that too many Americans back home take for granted the freedoms we enjoy, thanks to the sacrifice and service of our troops, past and present.

This week we changed our government by electing a new president from a different party and a new Congress more representative of that same party. Yet, the change was peaceful. There were no tanks in the streets.

That's not the case for regime change in many countries around the world. But the unrest that has accompanied the toppling of foreign governments does not occur in the United States because of our veterans. Our first veterans won our independence, enabling the establishment of our democracy. In the generations since, they have continued to step forward to defend it. That's why we should honor them every day, not just on November 11.

While chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I had the great opportunity of meeting many American service veterans and bringing them before my Committee. Their heroic stories of courage and selflessness taught the Congress how to better care for their needs and those of the next generation of warriors. The testimony of Tammy Duckworth, a young Black Hawk helicopter pilot who lost both legs when a rocket-propelled grenade blasted into the cockpit, and of Jeremy Feldbusch, who lost his sight in Iraq, led me to write legislation passed by Congress to provide ample funds to our nation's "Wounded Warriors" to offset the costs their families incur when they have to leave jobs and homes to be with loved ones recuperating in military hospitals.

Last year the President signed a bill I authored, allowing the Department of Veterans Affairs to embark on major medical construction projects across the country, improving access to mental health care, enhancing telemedicine outreach, increasing help for homeless veterans and establishing an Office of Rural Health to better serve veterans like ours in Idaho.

[MORE]

Craig page 2, Looking Out for Our Veterans Who Secure America's Freedoms

The new law helps veterans stay closer to home, family and friends through a pilot program making non-VA facilities like private nursing homes and community hospitals eligible for State Veterans Home payments. We also enabled the VA to hire more clinicians to treat veterans dealing with blindness and post traumatic stress disorder.

Legislation I introduced to overturn a Civil War prohibition preventing veterans from hiring attorneys to navigate the VA claims processing system also is law. Veterans may still choose to be represented by a veterans service organization, but now they have more options to ensure they are receiving their rightful benefits for their service.

To further improve the lives of veterans in Idaho, I convinced the VA to approve three new Community Based Outpatient Clinics in Caldwell, Coeur d'Alene and Lewiston and made it possible for veterans in Salmon to receive mental health services via video link with the Boise VA medical center. And this past August we broke ground for the new Veterans Regional Office in Boise.

In April, Congress passed the Veterans Benefit Enhancement Act, which incorporated several bills I developed on the advice of our veterans. They included retroactive benefits for certain soldiers injured in the line of duty, even if they were not hurt or impaired in war operations in Iraq and Afghanistan; accelerated payment of veterans' educational assistance to certain veterans enrolled in the Montgomery GI Bill program, and development of veterans' apprenticeship and on-the-job training programs.

My retirement from the Congress in January won't end my advocacy on behalf of our service men and women. Whenever and wherever I meet veterans, I want to hear how they're doing and help make sure their concerns are being addressed. Our veterans are the reasons we enjoy the freedoms of living in the greatest country in the world, and we should give thought every day to what we can do to make their lives better.