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Obama studies deficit reduction proposals to ‘correct our fiscal course.’ President Barack Obama said he was reviewing the recommendations of his deficit reduction commission in a search to “correct our fiscal course.”

The 18-member panel drawn from Congress, business leaders and academia wrapped up its work Dec. 3 when the recommendations of its co-chairmen, former Sen. Alan Simpson, a Wyoming Republican, and Erskine Bowles, a former chief of staff for President Bill Clinton, were endorsed by 11 commissioners and rejected by seven. Five Democrats, Five Republicans and one independent voted for the proposal.

To move forward for congressional consideration, however, a supermajority of 14 was needed.

In his statement, Obama said, “The commission’s majority report includes a number of specific proposals that I—along with my economic team—will study closely in the coming weeks as we develop our budget” due to Congress around Feb. 1.

Obama formed the bipartisan commission in early 2010 to cut \$4 trillion from projected deficits in the coming decade through spending cuts in discretionary programs—including \$100 billion from the Defense Department, and changes in entitlement programs such as Social Security and Medicare, as well as tax increases—eliminating the mortgage interest deduction.

Although the commission did not reach the supermajority threshold, Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., minority leader, said in a statement “It is my hope that this effort will serve as a catalyst for achieving the spending and entitlement reform that our country so desperately needs.”

Sen. Kent Conrad, D-N.D., chairman of the Budget Committee and a member of the commission, said the panel provided “a strong message to our colleagues and to the country of what has to be done.”

“There are some ideas in here that I think are worth copying, borrowing and putting in this year’s budget, which I fully intend to do,” Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., a commission member who voted no, told the Wall Street Journal.

When Simpson and Bowles held a press conference Nov. 10 announcing their proposals, Simpson said jokingly: “We have harpooned every whale in the ocean and some of the minnows.” Adding, “No one has ever done that before.”

Army releases new request for proposals for Ground Combat Vehicle. Force protection against a classified list of threats, a nine-soldier capacity, full-spectrum-operations capability and on-time delivery within seven years are among the “big four” imperatives the Army has spelled out for those hoping to be selected to build the Ground Combat Vehicle (GCV).

The Army took the next step toward providing a ground combat vehicle for infantry soldiers, Nov. 30, when it issued a Request for Proposal (RFP) for the project. Industry has until Jan. 21 to submit proposals.

The four imperatives, said Col. Andrew DiMarco, program manager for Ground Combat Vehicle, are “non-negotiable.” “The vehicle has to be capable of carrying the nine-soldier squad,” he said. “And then on full spectrum, we have a series of growth requirements and we have some open architecture requirements that are non-negotiable.”

While the GCV program is expected to eventually produce multiple vehicles with varying capabilities, the focus for the first block of GCV development is an infantry combat vehicle.

Also in the RFP are affordability targets. Among those are a per-unit cost for the vehicle between \$9 and \$10.5 million. Also a cost target is an operation and sustainment cost of \$200 per operational mile. Both sets of numbers are in Fiscal Year 2010 dollars.

Not in the RFP: requirements spelling out how the GCV moves along the ground. “I have no requirement that says track or wheel,” said Michael N. Smith, director of the Army Maneuver Center of Excellence, who added a “track vs. wheel is a specious discussion.” Smith did say there are requirements in the RFP to fit the GCV on a C-17, but not onto a C-130.

It’s expected that by April 2011, the Army will reach milestone decision and will award Technology-Development contracts to three contractors. That phase of development lasts 24 months. The early prototype vehicle is expected by the middle of FY 2014, and the first full-up prototype is expected by the beginning of FY 2016.

DiMarco said the Army has initially planned for 1,874 GCVs. The first production models should roll off the assembly line in early April 2018.

(Editor’s note: This article is based on an Army News Service story.)

Obama signs act repealing Don't Ask, Don't Tell law. President Barack Obama signed the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act of 2010 into law Dec. 22 before an audience assembled at the Department of the Interior auditorium in Washington. "We are not a nation that says, 'Don't ask, don't tell,'" the president said at the signing ceremony. "We are a nation that says, 'Out of many, we are one.'"

Adding, "We are a nation that welcomes the service of every patriot. We are a nation that believes all men and women are created equal. Those are the ideals that generations have fought for. Those are the ideals that we uphold today, and now it is my honor to sign this bill into law."

The act repeals Section 654, Title 10, of the United States Code, that barred people who are openly gay, lesbian or bisexual from serving in the U.S. military. Today's signing, as the president pointed out, begins a process that will culminate in full repeal over the coming months.

The old policy remains in effect until Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen, USN, and the president certify the military's readiness to implement the repeal.

"It's especially important for service members to remember that," Obama added.

The president said he has spoken to all of the service chiefs, and all are committed to implementing the change swiftly.

"We are not going to be dragging our feet to get this done," Obama said. "As commander in chief, I am certain that we can effect this transition in a way that only strengthens our military readiness. People will look back on this moment and wonder [why it was] ever a source of controversy in the first place."

Mullen and Deputy Defense Secretary William J. Lynn attended the signing. Several former service members discharged under the old policy also were present. Obama commended their efforts and others' in bringing about the change.

"I also want to commend our military leadership," he said. "Ending Don't Ask, Don't Tell was a topic in my first meeting with Secretary Gates, Admiral Mullen and the Joint Chiefs. We talked about how to end this policy; we talked about how success in both passing and implementing this change depended on working closely with the Pentagon. And that's what we did."

Obama praised his defense and national security leaders for their oversight of the change.

The president said he has "every confidence" of the professionalism and patriotism of U.S. military members as repeal moves forward.

(Editor's note: The article is based on a story by Karen Parrish, Armed Forces Press Service.)

Vets pleased with new GI Bill, see room for improvement. A year after Veterans Affairs implemented the Post-9/11 GI Bill, the American Council on Education has released a study showing that most veterans are pleased with the new benefit, but there is room for improvement.

The study, released Nov. 10, canvassed four colleges and students representing 13 installations, for a total of 230 survey and focus group participants. The majority of veterans using the new GI Bill benefit said they were glad for the increase in tuition support and monthly housing and book stipend, yet many reported that payments were often several months late.

"Some of these students were planning on supporting themselves with this money," said Jennifer Steele, the researcher at RAND Corporation who led the study. Steele explained that when students who were expecting the GI Bills' housing stipend did not receive their pay, the VA issued emergency funds to help out. Still, some veterans found themselves in the negative.

"It was a challenge," said Keith Wilson, the VA education service director. "It took us longer to process claims than we were hoping for."

Wilson explained that when the program first launched, processing a single claim required approval by several employees using several different computer systems. Last fall, he said, an average claim would take 48 days to pay, now that number is down to 18.

"We've moved to an automated pay system," Wilson said, adding that in the future, the VA would like to be able to process some claims without any human assistance.

The new GI Bill appears to have inspired several veterans to pursue higher education, simply because the benefits were available. Of those who participated in the survey, 24 percent reported that the existence of the bill drove their decision to enroll, and 18 percent said the bill influenced where they went to school.

Other survey findings showed some veterans had difficulty receiving academic credit for military experience, and 14 percent of respondents said their institution's transfer credit policy was a factor in their school choice.

Wilson said difficulties with transfer credits are across the board, it's not just an issue veterans face. The trouble stems from different colleges offering similar, but not-equivalent courses. Each school has its own transfer policy.

He gave the example of a student wanting to transfer a same-level Western civilization class to a new institution, but the time period studied in the class he's already taken doesn't match up to the class he is attempting to receive credit for.

(Article is based on an American Forces Press Service story.)

Army launches criminal investigation into Arlington's handling of remains. The Army is investigating the possibility that a single grave at Arlington National Cemetery was used as a dumping site for a number of cremated remains that had been improperly dug up.

The discovery of eight urns or containers in a plot that was supposed to contain a single set of remains that had been identified as "Unknown" on the headstone set off the criminal investigation.

Christopher Grey, a spokesman for the Army Criminal Investigation Command, told the New York Times, the discovery in October of so many remains raised questions beyond those of sloppy management identified in a year-long Inspector General's report on cemetery operations. "You don't just take remains and bury them anywhere you want."

Military forensics experts have identified three sets of remains, and the Army is notifying families. Work continues on trying to identify the others, but DNA identification will be difficult because the remains are ash and bone.

The original set of "Unknown" remains at the site had been discovered several years earlier in a landfill and returned to the cemetery for reburial.

Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., chairman of an oversight subcommittee investigating conditions at Arlington, noted the Senate had passed a bill Dec. 3, the same day as the investigation was announced, that codified reforms concerning the cemetery's management and operations.

In a release, she said, "I am outraged at the problems that continue to surface at Arlington Cemetery. The families that have loved ones at Arlington Cemetery deserve so much better than this. These are our heroes. This is the most sacred ground we have in the United States."

Adding, "This legislation will help hold the folks at Arlington accountable for their progress in identifying and fixing any errors in the burial records, changing the way they manage contracts, and for their efforts to reach out to families who are suffering from this unnecessary heartbreak."

President proposes 2-year freeze on federal civilian pay. President Barack Obama is proposing a two-year freeze on federal civilian employee pay, a move that he said would save \$2 billion over the rest of this fiscal year and \$28 billion over the next five years.

Speaking Nov. 29, he said, "This is not just a line item on a federal ledger. These are people's lives. They're doctors and nurses who care for our veterans; scientists who search for better treatments and cures; men and women who care for our national parks and secure our borders and our skies; Americans who see that the Social Security checks get out on time, who make sure that scholarships come through, who devote themselves to our safety."

If Congress approves the proposal, it would take effect Jan. 1, the date when federal locality pay rates are set. It also would precede by about one month the release of the federal budget in February.

The pay freeze does not apply to the armed forces.

Rep. Eric Cantor, R-Va., who will become House Majority Leader when the new Congress opens, said he was encouraged by the president's move.

In a statement he said, "Many federal employees do important work, but this is exactly the kind of savings measure we have to make in order to begin to restore some fiscal sanity in America, especially considering recent reports of federal salaries significantly outpacing private-sector salaries."

Incoming House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, earlier in November proposed a freeze on federal hiring as a way to bring down the \$1 trillion federal deficit.

In making the announcement in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, Obama cited his administration's plan is reining in federal non-security discretionary spending, eliminating bonuses for political-appointed employees and the terminating or cutting back the spending in 120 federal programs for a projected savings of \$20 billion.

Gates reports ‘some good news’ in Helmand as strategy review wraps up.

As he traveled about Afghanistan as part of the administration’s review of its strategy there, Defense Secretary Robert Gates told soldiers at Forward Operating Base Connolly, “If we don’t fight these guys on their 10-yard line, we’ll have to fight them on our 10 yard line.”

The base lies in the eastern part of Afghanistan; close to Tora Bora the area where Osama bin Laden eluded American and Afghan forces nine years ago. Later while at the base Dec. 7 but speaking with reporters, Gates added, “There is some good news in terms of local governance; they’ve talked to me about capable district leaders, Afghan district leaders. But there’s no question, being here close to the border that they’re in a tough fight.”

The Taliban and its allies in the Haqqani Network have used sanctuaries in Pakistan to regroup and prepare for new cross-border attacks.

Maj. Gen. Richard Mills, USMC, regional commander southwest, told reporters in the Pentagon, that conditions in Marja in Helmand Province are stabilizing after several months of heavy fighting in an area long controlled by the Taliban. The province has also been a major center of opium production, a major source of income for the Taliban.

The battle for Marja is “essentially over,” he said in video teleconference to the Pentagon.

“In Marja today, if you walk near the district center, there’s a restaurant that flourishes, there are shops that are open, and there’s quite a—you run into a traffic jam if you’re not careful on the main street.[A] route when we got here back in June, was virtually untrafficable due to IEDs [improvised explosive devices].”

In answer to a question about the resiliency of the insurgency in the province, Mills said, “You see a weaker and weaker and weaker insurgent each time that he comes back. When he comes back, he relies more on murder and intimidation and tactics and techniques that will frighten the population. And he hopes that that’s going to re-win him his position here within the province. It’s failed each and every time. He now has resorted to murder, intimidation, as I spoke earlier. And he’s meeting the resistance of the local nationals. They organize themselves, perhaps most importantly, as they support the Afghan security forces.”

Addressing the drug-trafficking issue, Helmand Governor Gulab Mangal added, “Production of narcotics is one of the main avenues of financial support for enemy forces. They apply pressure on people to grow opium, so they could financially benefit and run their war machine. But I can frankly say that the battle machine of insurgents is broken down.”

Mild TBI may increase risk for Alzheimer’s disease.

Improvised explosive devices and multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan are boosting the incidence of mild traumatic brain injury, a condition that some early studies indicate may increase a soldier’s future risk for Alzheimer’s disease, a researcher said Dec. 7.

Dr. Elaine Peskind spoke at the 3rd Annual Trauma Spectrum Conference held today and yesterday at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md.

The conference—sponsored by the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury, the National Institutes of Health and the Department of Veterans Affairs—targeted emerging research on polytrauma, recovery and reintegration for servicemembers, veterans and their families.

Traumatic brain injury severe enough to cause loss of consciousness—from a sports concussion, an automobile accident or an IED—“is the best-established environmental risk factor for Alzheimer’s, the late-life dementing disorder occurring in up to 50 percent of people over age 85,” she said.

Peskind is a geriatric psychiatrist and a research professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the University of Washington School of Medicine in Seattle. She also is a Veterans’ Administration doctor who is credentialed at Joint Base Lewis McChord. There, since 2007, she and a colleague have conducted a clinical trial to evaluate the drug Prazosin for active-duty soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder.

It was during the Lewis McChord study that Peskind noticed the link between PTSD and mild traumatic brain injury, or mTBI, and memory problems.

During study visits, she noticed that soldiers regularly took little notebooks out of their shoulder pockets and wrote down everything she said—so they wouldn’t forget, they told her. And study coordinators had to call and remind the soldiers to come to their appointments.

Peskind, who once considered mTBI a problem of rehabilitation rather than mental health, called it a “classic light bulb moment. I said, wow, maybe we do have a problem here,” she added, “and I became very interested in TBI research.”

The nature of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is contributing to the mTBI problem, she said.

“As of this month, something in the vicinity of 2 million soldiers and Marines have been deployed to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—OIF and OEF—and nearly 800,000 have been deployed more than once,” she said.

And the weapon of choice for insurgents in both war zones is a range of improvised explosive devices, she said.