

Scandal erupts over Pentagon's forcing California National Guard veterans to repay bonuses

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Thousands of former California National Guard soldiers have been dunned for tens of millions of dollars they received in bonus payments paid out almost a decade ago in exchange for their service in Iraq and Afghanistan, with the Pentagon claiming the bonuses were unauthorized.

To meet the demand for soldiers in two increasingly unpopular wars, the Pentagon budget for reenlistment bonuses soared to \$1.4 billion in 2008.

California National Guard officials, striving to meet enlistment targets, doctored paperwork to make bonuses and student-loan repayments widely available for retired soldiers in exchange for reenlisting. Estimates of the supposedly unauthorized payments range from \$70 to \$100 million.

The California Guard's incentive manager, Army Master Sergeant Toni Jaffe, was convicted of fraudulently paying out \$15.2 million, and in 2012 was sentenced to 30 months in federal prison. Three lower-level California Guard recruiters have been convicted and given probation.

Congress rejected a 2014 request by the California National Guard to pass legislation forgiving the soldiers' debts. Neither of the two major political parties called for hearings or any other measure to protect the former soldiers, many of whom saw combat, and some of whom were wounded.

Following the Congressional non-action, the Pentagon began aggressively clawing back the bonuses. They sent retired soldiers letters demanding the immediate repayment of sums ranging from \$10,000 to \$50,000, along with a one percent "processing fee." Rubbing salt into wounds, any resistance by the ex-soldiers triggered usurious interest charges and other

penalties, followed by wage garnishments and real estate liens.

The Pentagon has already collected millions from its former soldiers.

Numerous press reports have detailed the financial hardships being imposed on people lured into the Pentagon's war machine by the cash payments.

Christopher Van Meter, a schoolteacher injured in Iraq by a roadside bomb, refinanced his family's Modesto, California home to pay back \$25,000 in reenlistment bonuses and \$21,000 in student loan repayments.

Susan Haley, a 26-year veteran who served in Afghanistan, sends the Pentagon \$650 a month to pay down the \$20,500 she received in bonuses. One of her sons, a medic, lost his leg in combat.

In 2007 Robert Richmond reenlisted in exchange for a \$15,000 bonus as a Special Forces soldier. He used the money to stabilize his finances after going through a divorce during his 2002-2003 tour in Afghanistan. As a result of his reenlistment tour in Iraq, Richmond suffered permanent back and brain injuries from a roadside bomb near Hillah, 60 miles south of Baghdad.

In 2014 Richmond received the Pentagon's demand for repayment. So far he has refused to pay, but the government lien has destroyed his credit rating, and the amount claimed has grown to \$19,694.62.

According to Andreas Mueller, a spokesperson for the California Guard, his state is the only one so far to have audited bonus payouts made at the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Laura Ochoa, a Pentagon spokesperson, acknowledged that the majority of cases are from California, and that "there may be other states involved."

“We do not have a list of those states at this time,” Ochoa said.

The revelation of the Pentagon’s scandalous treatment of its former soldiers has, predictably, triggered a media and political firestorm, with various bourgeois politicians denouncing the collection efforts, but not the criminal wars the soldiers were paid to fight.

“These troops deserve our support and our deepest gratitude,” according to a Monday evening statement issued by Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton. “They served admirably and upheld their part of the bargain.”

At a Florida rally on Monday, Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump called those responsible “stupid,” “corrupt,” and “incompetent people,” pledging that the forced repayment program was “something that would never happen under a Trump administration.”

Regardless of whether the Pentagon’s bonus repayment program continues, its disclosure reveals the utter contempt of the military-intelligence complex, along with its congressional stooges of both parties, for those dragooned by economic conditions into serving as cannon fodder for its imperialist interventions.



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