

COLUMN | Support Our Troops

Throughout this great nation's storied history, brave men and women have answered the call to defend our freedoms and way of life. Tragically, some have made the ultimate sacrifice by giving their lives in defense of our liberty, and their sacrifices serve as a constant reminder of the high cost of freedom and the hope for a safer, more peaceful world.

As Memorial Day approaches and we pay tribute to our fallen heroes, it is important to honor those currently serving our nation. Aside from protecting and improving their benefits, one of the best ways to remember the sacrifices of past service members is to make certain that we support our current warriors. To this end, I have sponsored three bills that would help military families during these economic times and help boost morale for those service members stationed abroad.

H.R. 1624 would exempt all active duty military personnel from paying federal income tax on the first \$16,800 of basic pay. If enacted, the legislation will provide an across the board tax cut for all service members and result in a one-hundred percent tax cut for 66,000 of our force's lowest paid troops.

Many citizens throughout our community send care packages to troops stationed overseas. They don't mind spending the money on CDs and DVDs, homemade cookies, and favorite snack foods but they could spend more on these goodies if they didn't have to pay so much for postage. In January, I joined with fellow Tampa Bay Delegation members Representatives Kathy Castor & Adam Putnam in introducing H.R. 707, the Home Front to Heroes Postal Benefits Act, which would provide free monthly vouchers for charities and military families to ship care packages to our troops stationed abroad. Having traveled to Iraq myself, I know the impact these pieces of home have on our troops engaged in battle.

Since 1971, when our nation's military became an all volunteer force, a law was enacted that required military pay rates to be "reasonably comparable" to those in the private sector with similar skills, education, and experience. Unfortunately, due to budgetary constraints over the years, the military's pay increase has not always met this criteria and a "pay gap" was created. For this reason, I have introduced H.R. 1592, which would guarantee a pay increase for uniformed services members for the next four years.

Our nation's brave men and women in uniform have fought gallantly to ensure the continued safety, security, and prosperity of this great nation. The debt we owe them for their sacrifices can never be repaid. However, these bills take a small step in the right direction to show our appreciation for their valor.

Congressman Gus M. Bilirakis represents Florida's Ninth Congressional District, which includes portions of Pasco, Pinellas, and Hillsborough counties.