

The Day

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BRAC: Democrats' Ads Attack Simmons For Vote Against Diverting Funds From Base Closures

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Rep. Rob Simmons, R-2nd District, lashed out at the Democratic Party Saturday, decrying ads criticizing two recent votes on defense appropriations as “tasteless” and inappropriate for Memorial Day weekend.

Democrats, meanwhile, continued to condemn Simmons for opposing an extension of the military's healthcare program to all reservists and National Guard members, and for changing his vote at the last minute on an amendment that would have diverted \$53 million from the Pentagon's base closure process to help veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The ads, timed for Memorial Day, are being broadcast in the home districts of 12 GOP representatives who opposed the extension of health benefits under TRICARE, the military's health care program for veterans.

The narrator of the advertisements, Maj. Gen. John Havens, the retired adjutant general of the Missouri National Guard, criticizes the vote against the expanded care as “just wrong,” according to a transcript of the spot provided by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

“Congressman Rob Simmons was among those who voted to deny these heroes the health care they deserve,” the ad says. “Tell Congressman Simmons he owes those who serve our nation more than Memorial Day speeches.”

Simmons responded with a sharply worded statement – mentioning his military service, including three years in combat in Vietnam – which said he considered it “offensive that the DCCC would engage in deceptive partisan attacks over Memorial Day.”

“This is a time for remembrance and reflection, for placing flags on gravestones, for patriotic parades – not divisive partisan rhetoric,” the statement said. “Shame on them for airing these trash advertisements on such a solemn occasion.”

A spokeswoman for the DCCC, Sarah Feinberg, responded in kind: "Shame on Rob Simmons for voting against health care for National Guard members and reservists," she said.

Democrats, including Simmons' probable rival in 2006, Joe Courtney, had already been questioning the two votes, saying they showed the Republican bowing to pressure from his leadership.

Simmons supported the extension of TRICARE to all reservists and National Guard members when it was added to a defense authorization bill in the House Armed Services Committee, but after it was stripped from the bill by the committee's chairman, he voted against an attempt to add it back to the bill on the House floor.

The reason, Simmons said in an interview Friday afternoon, was money: The expanded program would have covered reservists and Guard members even if they were not called up, and would have potentially shifted huge health care costs onto the military that it could not bear.

"It was put in front of us late at night and we were told certain things about it," Simmons said, referring to his vote for the measure in committee.

"It sounded good on the surface," he said. "Later, when we discovered what it actually did, I could not support that."

Simmons said he continues to support TRICARE coverage for Guard members and reservists when they are called up to active duty.

And while Simmons' district could be devastated by the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission (BRAC) process, since the Pentagon recommended closing the Naval Submarine Base in Groton, he said he did not approve of stripping away \$53 million that could be used to alleviate the effects of the program in towns that will lose their military bases.

"BRAC is a process that I think should be delayed or even terminated because we're at war," Simmons said. "However, there are communities around the country that are going to have their bases closed or scheduled for realignment this year. ... To take money out of BRAC, I consider to be unfair to those towns."

But Democrats said Simmons may have trouble explaining why he at first supported the BRAC amendment – both he and Rep. Nancy Johnson, R-5th District, initially voted yes, but changed their votes. The measure failed by a single vote.

He will have a chance to explain the vote, Courtney said, on Monday, when Simmons is scheduled to march in a Memorial Day parade in Vernon, Courtney's hometown.

Simmons said there was no particular reason – other than being invited – that he'd be appearing there. "I just show up," the congressman said.

"Frankly, I think it's nice that he's coming to share a great parade in Vernon," Courtney said. "I think once people see what happened Thursday, he's going to have a lot of explaining to do." ■