

World/Nation

Reagan pays up debt to veterans by allowing them seat on Cabinet

WASHINGTON (AP) — Saying America's debt to military men and women doesn't end the day the uniform comes off, President Reagan signed legislation Tuesday giving veterans a Cabinet-level voice for the first time.

"I'm saying to all our veterans what I say to new Cabinet members: Welcome aboard!" said Reagan, the self-proclaimed enemy of an expanding federal government, who once suggested abolishing the departments of Education and Energy.

Sitting under a sparkling autumnal sun in front of a columned building of the National War College at Fort McNair, the president signed into law the bill creating the Department of Veterans Affairs, effective March 15.

Spokesmen for veterans organizations applauded the elevation of veterans issues in the councils of government, but noted that the legislation offers no increases in compensation or improvements in health care.

Cooper T. Holt, executive director of the Washington office of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, said he recalled the day

federal agencies and merits being put on par with other Cabinet departments. There are some 27 million veterans

compared by Defense Secretary Frank C. Carlucci and Adm. William Crowe, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he said: "I've said before that America's debt to those who would fight for her defense doesn't end the day the uniform comes off. For the security of our nation, it must not end."

The House and Senate, paying election-year homage to veterans, had both given overwhelming approval to the bill. Among other things, it will place a secretary of veterans affairs on the Cabinet, create the position of deputy secretary and as many as a half-dozen assistant secretaries.

"I don't expect that it is going to produce any miracles," said H.F. "Sparky" Gierke, national commander of the American Legion.

Gierke said that despite the creation of a larger agency, with another layer of high-ranking assistants, the measure would not consign veteran's problems to a mammoth bureaucracy.

"I'm saying to all our veterans what I say to new Cabinet members: Welcome aboard!"

— President Reagan

— last Nov. 10 — that Reagan signaled he had accepted Cabinet-level status for veterans.

"There were several of us over there at the White House, and we came prepared to make a case," Holt recalled in a telephone interview. "But when he came in, he apparently had decided against some of his advisers, and he said he wanted to do it."

Supporters of the legislation had argued that the Veterans Administration already has the fifth-largest budget among

and 49 million dependents or survivors, although only about 2.5 to 3 million of them rely on Veterans Administration services on a regular basis. The agency has a \$30 billion budget, and it will disburse \$14 billion in income maintenance and \$626 million for education and rehabilitation assistance this year.

Reagan said the bill gives veterans what they have deserved so long — a seat at the table of our national affairs.

Flanked by leaders of congressional committees on military affairs, and ac-

Plaintiffs get \$1 million from KKK

ATLANTA (AP) — Forty-nine civil rights activists who were pelted with rocks and bottles when they marched into virtually all-white Forsyth County were awarded nearly \$1 million by a jury that found the Ku Klux Klan responsible.

A verdict unsealed in U.S. District Court on Tuesday also found 11 individuals responsible for attacking the activists, who marched into the county north of Atlanta on Jan. 17, 1987, and were met by the counter-demonstrators, many of them KKK members or sympathizers.

The jury reached its verdict Oct. 5, but Judge Charles A. Moya Jr. ordered it sealed to give those who brought the lawsuit time to decide whether to join Atlanta City Councilman Hosea Williams, who wanted to drop it.

Williams, who helped organize the march and was among those who filed the lawsuit, urged toward the end of the trial that it be dropped because it would impoverish the families of KKK members.

He said Tuesday he would not take any money from the settlement.

"Regardless of the court's decision, my decision not to accept one single penny of my white brothers' and sisters' possessions is a matter of conscience," Williams said. "It is also stooping lower than the KKK and other white supremacists to take away from them their hard-earned material possessions, simply because they brutalized us in responding to the sicknesses of our capitalistic society."

In a letter Williams sent his fellow marchers during the trial, he said he had "talked" to slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and King had told him "Jesus wanted him not to sue the Klan."

State Rep. J.E. "Billy" McKinney, who had opposed Williams' effort to drop the lawsuit, said Williams' "religion and communication with the dead should not interfere with our constitutional rights and justice."

Wage, benefit hikes drive up payroll costs

WASHINGTON (AP) — Wages in the past 12 months have risen an average 3.9 percent, while private employer costs for benefits have soared 6.7 percent — more than double the previous year — largely because of increases in Social Security taxes, the government said Tuesday.

The combined effect of the pay raises and higher benefit costs have sent total employer costs up 4.7 percent in the 12 months ending Oct. 1, compared with a 3.4 percent rise in the previous 12-month period, the Labor Department said.

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, has risen by 4.2 percent over the past 12 months, the government reported last week.

The steep increase in benefit costs resulted primarily from a rise last January in employers' Social Security tax rate from 7.15 percent to 7.51 percent, the Labor Department said.

It also cited large increases in health insurance costs and lump-sum bonus payments from profit-sharing arrangements, which are now calculated by the government as a benefit rather than a wage. In the 12 months ending October a year ago, benefits costs rose only 3.1 percent, but they went up 6.7 percent in 12 months ending Oct. 1.

Non-union employees continued to get larger percentage pay raises than union members — a trend begun in 1983 — except for blue-collar workers in manufacturing.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics said wage rates among union members rose an average 2.9 percent in the past 12 months, compared with 3.9 percent for non-union workers. In the previous 12-month period, union wages rose an average 1.7 percent, compared with 3.8 percent for non-union employees.

"This pattern reversed when limited to blue-collar workers in manufacturing," the bureau said, with wage increases in the past year averaging 3.2 percent for union members and 2.8 percent for non-union workers.

For the first time, the government also is comparing total compensation increases between union and non-union workers to account for the lump-sum arrangements.

With those benefits included, employer costs rose the same 4.5 percent among union and non-union employees, the bureau said.

John Zalusky, an economist for the AFL-CIO, called the statistics "refreshing."

"They're beginning to show in fact what is really going on out there in the world," he said, "but there still is a good way to go."

For example, Zalusky cited the last round of steel-industry contracts in which the union conceded pay cuts to companies then operating at losses in exchange for a share of future profits or stock transfers if no profits occurred.

"The statistics are now picking up the profit distributions but not the stock transfers for what essentially is a debt owed workers," he said. "In the future I expect them to start putting in the value of stock ownership plans and in the distant future retraining funds, such as those negotiated with the auto companies."

Despite the disparity in percentage wage increases in recent years, unionized workers continue to make about 35 percent more than non-union workers — an average gap of \$123 a week in 1987 compared with a gap of \$119 in 1986 — according to government data.

Rescuers work to recover Manila shipwreck survivors

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — Rescuers said Tuesday they had found only 15 survivors from the 500 people on a ship sunk by Typhoon Ruby, which hit shore with 140 mph winds that flattened thousands of homes and took at least 97 lives.

Darkness and bad weather forced an overnight suspension of the search for survivors of the Dona Marilyn, which replaced the Dona Paz on the Sulpicio Lines run between Manila and Tacloban. The Dona Paz sank last Dec. 20 after a collision off Mindoro Island and more than 3,000 people perished.

More than 100,000 Filipinos were

made homeless by Ruby, which was reported in the South China Sea late Tuesday, heading west with top winds of about 100 mph.

In suburban Manila, U.S. and Philippine helicopters rescued hundreds of people stranded on rooftops and in trees by the flooding Marikina River.

Coast Guard officials said the 2,845-ton passenger liner sank Monday in the Visayas Sea about 300 miles southeast of Manila.

It was carrying 451 passengers and 60 crew members from Manila to Tacloban on Leyte Island when it radioed a distress

call. Sulpicio Lines general manager Carlos Go said.

Lt. Rey Esguerra of the coast guard station in Cebu said rescuers had found 11 survivors on Maripipi Island and another small island, and four people were found alive in the water.

Officials reported 25 people missing because of Typhoon Ruby at Cagayan de Oro, a coastal city on Mindanao Island, and 15 unaccounted for after a crowded bus plunged into a swollen river Monday in Antique province.

Floods on Luzon and other islands caused landslides and washed away bridges.

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