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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
September 28, 1998

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**OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN BUYER
MILITARY PERSONNEL SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING
ON THE AWARD OF THE
MEDAL OF HONOR TO THEODORE ROOSEVELT**

September 28, 1998

Today the Subcommittee turns its attention to an issue that has frustrated a number of Members of Congress, the award of the Medal of Honor to Theodore Roosevelt for his valor on July 1, 1898 during the Battle of San Juan Hill (more formally known as San Juan Heights) in the Spanish-American War.

I include myself among those that are frustrated by this case. I was greatly disappointed by the Army's initial reaction that the Medal of Honor for Theodore Roosevelt is not justified. It is my view that the medal is justified and that the Secretary of the Army would be within his authority to recommend approval to the President without further action by the Congress.

Theodore Roosevelt's heroic performance is well documented and undisputed, and would appear to meet the standard established for award of the medal at the time. In my view, the case for awarding the Medal of Honor to Theodore Roosevelt rests on three points:

- (1) Theodore Roosevelt's actions were consistent with the actions of those who were awarded the Medal of Honor that day and throughout the Spanish-American War. Of the 3 officers and 19 soldiers who received the Medal for their actions on July 1, 1898, 21 received the medal because they gave up cover and exposed themselves to enemy fire in order to retrieve wounded comrades.

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I encountered a similar Marine Corps Medal of Honor case during my reading of the most recent copy of Leatherneck. The case pertained to Sergeant John H. Quick who was awarded the Medal of Honor for exposing himself to enemy fire to signal a U.S. warship to cease fire after it had begun to shell friendly forces.

If voluntary exposure to enemy fire was the criteria for award of the medal, then Theodore Roosevelt clearly exceeds the standard. Once the order to attack was received, he mounted his horse and rode up and down the ranks in full view of enemy gunners. During the assault on Kettle Hill, he remained on horseback thus leaving no doubt that he was the most important target in the attacking force. The fact that he was not killed is nothing short of a miracle.

- (2) The actions of Theodore Roosevelt on July 1, 1898 were conspicuous and clearly set him apart from his contemporaries. Most importantly, it was his leadership that changed the course of the battle. When he encountered a regular Army unit that was reluctant to press the attack, it was Theodore Roosevelt who said “step aside” and led the Rough Riders through the ranks of the stalled unit to pursue the attack on Kettle Hill. His leadership was so compelling that many of the regular junior officers and men fell in line with the Rough Riders.

This is what decorations for heroism are all about—the raw courage to make decisions and put your life in jeopardy to win the battle. If he had not acted to press the attack, there is no doubt that many more lives would have been lost to enemy gunners as the U.S. forces waited for orders at the bottom of the hill.

- (3) Finally, there is sufficient evidence for me to conclude that politics, and not an honest assessment of his valor, was the prime consideration in the evaluation of the Theodore Roosevelt’s recommendation for the Medal of Honor.

Theodore Roosevelt bore the full blame, whether justified or not, for the leak of the “round robin” letter to the press that proved so embarrassing to the McKinley Administration, and particularly the Secretary of War, Russell Alger. Since there is no documentation to support why the recommendation for the medal was not approved, I have to believe that Secretary Alger had the opportunity and motivation to deny Theodore Roosevelt the Medal of Honor that the Secretary knew Roosevelt wanted very badly.

I also have to believe that being a “volunteer,” and an upstart volunteer at that, may have been the source of some prejudice by the regular Army. Theodore Roosevelt exercised little restraint in his criticism of the Army during his four-month tour of duty. It is important to note that of the 22 Medals of Honor awarded for service in the Santiago area on July 1, only one was awarded to a volunteer—First Lieutenant Mills. The remaining 21 medals were awarded to officers and enlisted members assigned to regular Army units.

I believe the Army should rethink their consideration of the Medal of Honor for Theodore Roosevelt and do the right thing—approve the medal.