

Welcoming Our Warriors



Paul Rieckhoff

February 6, 2008

In Brief

“Providing real support for troops and veterans must be viewed as both a moral duty and a crucial national security priority. Future generations of Americans will decide whether to serve our country based on the extent to which we welcome this generation of servicemembers home.”

- Paul Rieckhoff

The most important lesson the United States must learn from the Iraq War is that preparing for the homecoming of our warriors is as critical as planning for operations on the battlefield.

Nearly 1.6 million Americans have served in Iraq or Afghanistan since September 11, 2001, but too many of them lack the support and care they have earned. Tens of thousands of new veterans face serious mental health problems and thousands more struggle to pay for school, find a job or secure affordable housing. It's not too late to heal this generation of combat veterans, but doing so requires immediate and effective action.

No one comes home from war unchanged. At least one in three, or 500,000, Iraq veterans will suffer a mental health injury as a result of their service, a rate comparable to or higher than that seen after Vietnam. These injuries can lead to divorce, substance abuse, domestic violence, homelessness and suicide, and the consequences are already visible in military households across the country.

For too long, the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs sat idly by and allowed physically- and psychologically-wounded troops to fall through the cracks. We must stem this flood now and establish systems to care for these heroes. Among the steps needed to address the urgent mental health problems are mandatory and confidential screenings by mental health professionals for all service members, confidential alcohol and substance abuse counseling, and treatment and increased suicide prevention initiatives.

Our service members are feeling the financial effects of combat as well. Due to the lack of support services for veterans, returning service members are finding it increasingly difficult to transition back into civilian life, pay for college or find employment. However, there is action we can take now to address these issues.

We owe our country's newest generation of veterans a GI Bill that actually covers the full cost of college. During World War II, the GI Bill made it possible for 8 million combat veterans to afford an education, but the current educational benefits offered to veterans cover only 60-70 percent of the average cost of four years at a public college or university, or less than two years at a typical private college. America must take steps to ensure that serving one's country opens, not closes, the doors to higher education, including increased benefits for Reservists and National Guardsmen. We must also ensure that tuition costs are paid up front and directly to the college, allowing veterans access to education without taking out loans.

Finding a job is also a critical element of the transition back to civilian life. Employers who hire National Guardsmen and Reservists or homeless veterans should receive tax credits. The protections provided in the Uniformed Services Employment and Redeployment Rights Act (USERRA) should be expanded and better enforced. National Guardsmen and Reservist entrepreneurs called to active duty for more than 90 days should qualify for small-business grants. Unemployment is a significant cause of homelessness among veterans, and increased funding for employment assistance and reintegration programs is essential to prevent any more of this nation's heroes from sleeping on the streets.

Since the beginning of the Iraq war, our country has gravely underestimated the problems our newest generation of veterans would face. But we can still correct our mistakes if we move quickly. This is the moment we must infuse our nation with a sincere appreciation for these heroes and help them heal from their wounds and live productive lives.

Providing real support for troops and veterans must be viewed as both a moral duty and a crucial national security priority. Future generations of Americans will decide whether to serve our country based on the extent to which we welcome this generation of servicemembers home. It doesn't matter if you're for or against the war; we all have a moral obligation to take care of those who have served.

Paul Rieckhoff is the Executive Director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (www.IAVA.org). Rieckhoff founded IAVA in 2004, after he returned from a year-long deployment in Iraq. IAVA is the country's first and largest non-profit and nonpartisan organization for veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and has more than 80,000 active veteran members and grassroots supporters nationwide. Through education, advocacy and community, IAVA works to improve the lives of this country's newest generation of veterans and their families. Rieckhoff is also the author of the critically acclaimed memoir, Chasing Ghosts.



What is IRAQ: Lessons Learned?

Five years into the Iraq war, Americans are left groping for answers. Are we safer? Can America's image be repaired? What are the lasting implications for our Constitution? Historians will spend decades examining this conflict, its causes, its conduct, and its consequences, but those left to grapple with the immediate policy implications must do so without the benefit of the perspective that time can often provide. What lessons should we draw from Iraq today so that we, as a nation, learn from this painful experience? Iraq: Lessons Learned is an initiative to begin answering those questions. The American Security Project asked some of the nation's best minds—military, policy, academic, political, business, religious, media and community—to ponder this question and provide insights from which we can all benefit.

