

SEVENTH ANNUAL
VETERANS DAY
SPECIAL EDITION

The Ripon Forum

Veterans Day 2025
Volume 59, No. 5

PAT HARRIGAN REFLECTS ON HIS MILITARY CAREER

"Service in uniform taught me that
weakness guarantees conflict,
and strength deters it."



The State of **AMERICA'S VETERANS**

by JIM WHALEY

Plus: "The Quiet Strength of Military Spouses"

by KATHY ROTH-DOUQUET

And: "Service, Trust, and the Future of American Democracy"

by RYE BARCOTT



Carlos, U.S. Army Veteran
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since 1965."*

Volume 59, Number 5

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proposals, and for a spirit of criticism, innovation,
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the Republican Party.



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In this edition

With Veterans Day approaching and for the seventh consecutive year, *The Ripon Forum* is dedicating an entire edition to those who served our country in uniform, a group of Americans that is not only smaller now than at any point in modern history, but is also more diverse and dispersed.

"Today, there are about 17.5 million veterans in the United States, representing roughly 6–7 percent of the adult population," writes Jim Whaley in the lead essay. "That's a dramatic shift from the decades following World War II, when veterans made up 10–15 percent of U.S. adults. By 2040, that share is projected to drop below 5 percent, and the total veteran population is expected to fall to around 13 million."

Whaley is a 20-year Army veteran who now serves as CEO of Mission Roll Call. In his essay, he also examines how the veteran population in the U.S. is changing, and the possible policy implications of these changes in the years ahead.

"As the community shrinks," he writes, "it is also becoming more diverse. Roughly 19 percent of veterans are now people of color, compared to less than 10 percent in 2000, and the number of women veterans is steadily rising, expected to make up nearly 18 percent of the total by 2040. Veterans are also geographically dispersed: about 4.7 million, more than one quarter of all veterans, live in rural communities, where access to healthcare, transportation, and employment can be especially challenging..."

"The population is also aging. Nearly half of all veterans are over the age of 65, and more than 40 percent live with a service-connected disability. Many are managing the long-term physical and mental health consequences of service, from chronic pain and toxic exposure to post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury. These realities shape the kind of care, support, and policy solutions they need."

The veteran community may be changing, but according to former Marine Rye Barcott, veterans collectively remain some of the most trusted individuals in the United States. Barcott now serves as the CEO of With Honor, another advocacy organization which, along with Gallup, recently conducted a poll to gauge how Americans perceive veterans. The poll, Barcott writes, "reveals something extraordinary ... In an era where cynicism about government is pervasive, the perception of veterans as trusted, mission-driven leaders represents one of the few bipartisan points of agreement left in American politics."

In another essay for this Special Edition, Kathy Roth-Douquet writes about "The Quiet Strength of Military Spouses." Roth-Douquet is the founder and CEO of Blue Star Families. She is also the wife of a retired Marine who raised a family through four deployments and nine moves. In her essay, she examines the challenges facing military spouses today, including the fact that an increasing number have to work. "According to the 2024 Blue Star Families Military Family Lifestyle Survey," she writes, 77 percent of active-duty families say having two incomes is vital to their financial well-being, up sharply from 63 percent in 2019."

Other veteran advocates featured in this edition include Besa Pinchotti, the CEO of the National Military Family Association, writing about the Army's efforts to modernize infrastructure to improve the quality of life for military families, and Will Thibeaup, a former Army Ranger who is now the Director of the American Military Project at the Claremont Institute, writing about the legacy of service in the military and the fact that over 80 percent of Army recruits have a family member who served, as well.

In other pieces, National Governors Association Chair Kevin Stitt examines some of the actions being taken by America's governors to assist America's veterans. U.S. Senators Jerry Moran and Richard Blumenthal, who serve as the Chairman and Ranking Member of the Veterans Affairs' Committee, write about their bipartisan efforts to keep America's commitment to those who served. And U.S. Senator Todd Young, a Navy veteran himself, writes about a subject that should be important to all veterans and all Americans — the need for the U.S. to invest in shipbuilding again.

Maryland Governor Wes Moore, along with U.S. Representatives Tom Barrett, Gil Cisneros, Gabe Evans, and Maggie Goodlander, write about their service in uniform, the importance of Veterans Day, and what the holiday means to them. And in our latest Ripon Profile, U.S. Representative Pat Harrigan discusses his own military service and how it shapes his service on Capitol Hill.

We hope you enjoy this 7th Annual Special Veterans Day Edition of *The Ripon Forum*, and, as always, we welcome any questions or comments you may have.

Lou Zickar, Editor
louzickar@riponsociety.org

How America's Governors are Honoring America's Veterans

by KEVIN STITT

America owes our veterans a debt that can never be repaid. Generations of veterans have fought and sacrificed to defend the freedoms, Constitution, security, and opportunity that make the United States the envy of the world.

It is our duty to give back to those who have given so much to us. As leaders of our states and commanders in chief of our states' National Guard units, governors take our debt to our veterans, active-duty servicemembers, and their families very seriously. Serving as chair of the National Governors Association (NGA), it is my honor to collaborate with fellow governors in honoring our veterans.

Oklahoma is home to over 340,000 veterans, making up about 9 percent of our total population. With help from veteran members in the state legislature, I've made it a priority each year of my administration to enact new legislation to support Oklahoma's veterans – from securing funding for a new VA hospital in Tulsa in 2020 to increasing mental health resources for veterans and their families.

Earlier this year, I was proud to sign legislation establishing the Oklahoma Veterans Foundation. This landmark legislation created an official state-overseen non-profit organization to enhance our ability to provide services and programs for Oklahoma veterans beyond the scope of federal or state funding. Government funding for programs to provide assistance for things like health care, home-buying, education, and vehicle repair sometimes falls short of needs. To ensure we fulfill our commitment to veterans, the Oklahoma Veterans Foundation bridges the gap and provides greater flexibility in meeting veterans' needs.

Everyone with a loved one in the military knows that

service involves the whole family. That understanding is the foundation of a National Governors Association initiative called *Do Your Part: State Leadership to Support Military Families*. Launched in partnership with the military and veteran family support organization Blue Star Families, *Do Your Part* draws on best practices advanced by governors to implement policies and programs to support military families in overcoming challenges like spousal employment, childcare, education, healthcare, and wellness, community connection and housing.

NGA Vice Chair Maryland Gov. Wes Moore serves as honorary chair of this work. A combat veteran, Gov. Moore has made supporting veterans and military families a priority – declaring 2024 the Year for Military Families; signing into law the *Families Serve Act* to expand job opportunities for military spouses; and joining the Elizabeth Dole Foundation's Hidden Heroes Campaign. The campaign raises awareness about the issues military caregivers face; brings critical resources to our nation's "hidden heroes" who care for wounded, ill and injured service members and veterans; and connects military caregivers to a community of their peers.

Our fellow governors are just as committed. To assist veterans in successfully transitioning to civilian life, governors highlight

opportunities each year through Invest in Veterans Week in March, and National Hire a Veteran Day in July.

Beyond raising awareness, governors throughout the nation are taking action on a variety of fronts to ensure veterans and their families have the support they deserve.

Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp signed legislation to establish a mental health support program grant for



As leaders of our states and commanders in chief of our states' National Guard units, governors take our debt to our veterans, active-duty servicemembers and their families very seriously.

veterans and their families, in addition to a series of bills supporting military families by ensuring spouses of military service members can start work under a license they hold in another state.

New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham signed legislation to expand property tax exemptions for veterans and to provide free access to state parks, in addition to securing a \$60 million investment from the state legislature to build state-of-the-art residences at a New Mexico State Veterans' Home.

Last year, New York Gov. Kathy Hochul announced the launch of New York State's first-ever Veterans Mobile Outreach Centers, equipping the New York State Department of Veterans' Services with a fleet of three vehicles uniquely outfitted to assist veterans, service members, and their families at any location across the state.

Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin signed 20 bipartisan bills in 2024 to expand support for Virginia's military personnel, veterans, and their families. The legislation focuses on improving critical services, easing housing

barriers, and enhancing protections for those who serve.

You can find more examples of governors' actions, and find out how you can help, on the NGA's website.

Veterans

represent the very best of America, and they deserve our best in return. When we honor their service on Veterans Day, we should renew our commitment to support veterans throughout the year. **RF**

Kevin Stitt serves as Governor of Oklahoma and is Chairman of the National Governors Association.

To assist veterans in successfully transitioning to civilian life, governors highlight opportunities each year through Invest in Veterans Week in March, and National Hire a Veteran Day in July.

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Delivering on Our Commitment to Our Veterans

by JERRY MORAN &
RICHARD BLUMENTHAL

On Veterans Day, our nation joins together to celebrate and honor the brave men and women who have served our nation in the armed services. There is no group we hold in higher regard than our nation's veterans. They represent the very best values of our country: courage, sacrifice, hard work and a willingness to put others first, both during and after their time in uniform.

Honoring our nation's veterans requires more than just saying "thank you for your service." It means making certain they receive the best quality care, benefits, and respect they deserve after their time in service. As Chairman and Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, it is our shared duty to uphold the promises this nation has made to take care of those who have served.

This is a sacred obligation, and the committee has a long history of setting aside politics to deliver on this promise by advancing meaningful legislative reforms for veterans in Kansas, Connecticut, and across the nation. While we may not agree on every legislative proposal, we always agree on the need to prioritize the fundamental mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA): to care for all who have borne the battle.

We also agree there is a lot of work to be done to honor our promises to our veterans. Veterans are best

served when VA and its workforce are empowered to fulfill this mission with focus, accountability, and transparency. Strengthening oversight, improving efficiency, and making certain the VA is responsive to the needs of those it serves are essential to delivering the kind of care and benefits veterans are truly deserving of.

Serving those who have sacrificed for our nation takes real action, not just words. Through key pieces of legislation like the *MISSION Act* in 2018 and the landmark *PACT Act* for toxic-exposed veterans in 2022, we are working together to deliver the support our nation's veterans need and deserve. As the cost-of-living changes, we are prioritizing increasing VA benefits, including disability compensation, clothing allowances and survivors' benefits, to keep pace with these increased costs. Every year, we pass legislation to make certain that veterans and their families can maintain financial stability without the worry of falling behind financially due to issues outside of their control.

These challenges and goals are not Republican or Democratic issues. They are American values that we, the leaders of the Committee, are committed to help pursue. Together, we will continue working in a bipartisan way to make the VA stronger, more accountable and better equipped to meet the needs of those who have given much to defend our freedoms. Our veterans have earned nothing less.

On this Veterans Day and every day, we reaffirm our commitment to the men and women who served our country, despite great risk and personal sacrifice. Now, it is our responsibility to serve them with the unity, respect and gratitude they deserve. **RF**

Jerry Moran is the senior U.S. Senator from the State of Kansas and serves as Chairman of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Richard Blumenthal is the senior U.S. Senator from the State of Connecticut and serves as the Ranking Democrat on the Committee on Veterans' Affairs.



**As Chairman and Ranking Member
of the Senate Committee on Veterans'
Affairs, it is our shared duty to uphold the
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care of those who have served.**

It's Time to Make American Ships Again

by TODD YOUNG

America's rise from 13 colonies to the most powerful nation on Earth was due, in large measure, to our dominance at sea. Our maritime power came not only from having a powerful Navy, but also from possessing a strong and capable commercial fleet.

From our founding, America's merchant ships carried raw materials and goods around the globe, generating great wealth for our nation and establishing secure supply chains. Today, an overwhelming amount of the goods that fuel our economy still arrive by sea. However, unlike the early days of our nation, hardly any of these goods are traveling on American ships. More and more, they are traveling on ships built, and increasingly registered, in China.

This change is the result of decades of neglect. Over time, the U.S. stopped prioritizing the importance of shipbuilding to our economic and national security and failed to invest in our maritime industry. As a result, this sector eroded, shipyards were abandoned, the shipping workforce was depleted, and America's commercial fleet is down to a mere 80 vessels.

Meanwhile, across the Pacific, China charted a different course. Through strategic government investment — and illegal market manipulation — China built the largest commercial fleet in the world: approximately 5,500 oceangoing vessels.

In a world without security threats — where we could trust China and its ambitions this wouldn't neces-

sarily be cause for concern. But that's not the world we live in. China will stop at nothing to exploit America's security vulnerabilities, undermine our relationships with trusted allies, and bully developing nations for its own gain. The supply chain interruptions we experienced during COVID would pale in comparison to a Chinese boycott of our ports.

More alarmingly, in time of war, America lacks sufficient shipyard and industrial capacity to repair or build new warships. China understands this, which undermines our military's objective to deter future conflict.

It's time to reverse course, return to our roots, and make American ships again.

To begin this rebuilding effort, I introduced the *SHIPS for America Act* with Senator Mark Kelly (D-AZ). This landmark legislation will revitalize U.S. shipbuilding, rebuild America's shipyard industrial base, support nationwide workforce development in this industry, and ensure we have the fleet we need to reclaim maritime dominance. Our bill is needed to bolster our supply chains, strengthen our war-fighting capabilities, and allow us to keep pace with China.

We are fortunate to have a President who understands the urgent need to address our rusted reality. Earlier this year, President Trump signed an executive order titled "Restoring America's Maritime Domi-

nance." The SHIPS Act, which mirrors multiple aspects of the President's executive order, would provide the funding and authorities to revitalize the maritime indus-



Senator Young toured the Corn Island Shipyard in Spencer County, Indiana on September 22nd.

Over time, the U.S. stopped prioritizing the importance of shipbuilding to our economic and national security and failed to invest in our maritime industry. As a result, America's commercial fleet is down to a mere 80 vessels.

try, while also putting up barriers against China's continued efforts to dismantle our shipping economy.

Together, the SHIPS Act and the President's executive order will lead to a shipbuilding revival across the country, and my home state is ready play a key role.

Along the Ohio River, southern Indiana communities have a long history of shipbuilding success. For years, Hoosiers working at the shipyards built commercial ships, including steamboats, barges, and towboats. When World War II broke out, these shipyards joined the war effort and produced the Navy's oceangoing ships at record-breaking levels. But when the war ended, America stopped producing ships and quickly became outpaced by foreign competition.

Indiana's once thriving shipyards are now mainly closed, except for Corn Island in southern Indiana along the Ohio River.

I recently toured Corn Island Shipyard to learn more about its operations, Hoosier workforce, and manufacturing of custom barges. The passage of the SHIPS Act would increase opportunities for little known shipyards like Corn Island across the nation.

Hoosier steel manufacturers could benefit from the increased need for steel to build these new ships. Small component manufacturers across the state would likely see additional demand.

Since the bill's introduction, numerous Hoosier small businesses have shared how the SHIPS Act could lead to more growth or opportunities for their workers.

Further, as one of the top agriculture states, Indiana relies heavily on exports. If our economy depends on goods carried aboard Chinese-flagged ships, our supply chain is at the mercy of China. But, if we increase our own shipping capabilities, we will have

more American ships exporting American goods. This will increase confidence and drive down costs for both our farmers and consumers.

This is the promise of the shipbuilding revival — revitalized shipyards, more good-paying American jobs, security from economic coercion, and enhanced naval readiness for a potential conflict with our greatest adversary.

It's time to Make American Ships Again. **RF**

Todd Young is the senior U.S. Senator for Indiana.

He is a Naval Academy grad and former Marine. He serves on the U.S. Senate Committees on Finance; Commerce, Science & Transportation; Small Business and Entrepreneurship; and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.



Meanwhile, across the Pacific, China charted a different course. Through strategic government investment — and illegal market manipulation — China built the largest commercial fleet in the world: approximately 5,500 oceangoing vessels.

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What Veterans Day Means to Me

“You learn what it means to serve — and serve with distinction.”

by WES MOORE

There's a misguided perception among civilians that soldiers are good at only one thing: Following orders. We know three words, the myth goes – “Yes,” “No,” and “Sir.” This couldn't be further from the truth. When I deployed to Afghanistan with the 82nd Airborne Division, I didn't just learn how to follow in times of crisis — I learned how to lead in times of crisis. The same went for the brave soldiers I fought alongside.

In the Army, you learn what it means to serve — and serve with distinction. You figure out how to adapt to new challenges. You start forgetting about ideological or political distractions. That education lasts a lifetime.

When our soldiers return home, they want to keep serving. Many choose the path of federal employment. About one in four federal workers is a veteran. They inspect our food, discover cures for disease, keep planes from crashing, and protect communities from violent crime.

But under President Trump, many of these veterans are now being shoved from the office chair to the unemployment line. If we want to be a nation that makes “thank you for your service” mean something again, we need to pump the brakes on widespread firings of federal employees.

It's hard to overstate the havoc wreaked by the Trump-Vance Administration's workforce reductions. In February, a report out of the House Appropriations Committee indicated that mass firings under Trump and Elon Musk's DOGE Initiative eliminated nearly 6,000 veterans from their positions in the federal government.

In July, the V.A. reported that the agency was on pace to reduce staff by 30,000 this fall.

Draconian cuts jeopardize the livelihoods of our veterans while diminishing the efficacy of federal supports for patriots in need. Over the summer, reporting from *The Guardian* underscored that “the number of medical staff on hand to treat veterans has fallen every month since Donald Trump took office.”

I am the governor of a diverse state that is home to over 260,000 federal workers and over 300,000 veterans. We feel these cuts deeply — in the wounded warrior suffering who can no longer access essential care, or the military family now in need of unemployment insurance after the family breadwinner got fired from their federal job. It is sickening to live in a country where we look at those who wear the flag on their shoulders and say to them: “You're on your own.”

In Maryland, we are proving there is a better way. Our *Government Modernization Initiative* is helping to cut government waste in a way that is responsible, not reckless. We are being disciplined and intentional in delivering commonsense savings that preserve essential services, such as reducing the state car fleet and purchasing laptops and other devices more strategically.

At the same time, we have enacted legislation that elevates our service members, veterans, and military families. Maryland is the first state in the nation to establish a pathway for free health care and dental care to members of the National Guard. We expanded Paid



**When our soldiers
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About one in four
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Leave for men and women in uniform who also have positions in State Government. I signed the largest tax break for young veterans in recent Maryland history. And we are just getting started.

In this moment of profound uncertainty, we need to make it easier for our veterans to serve our country — not harder. Honoring that mission to the fullest extent will require a reversal in the White House's current strategy of cutting federal agencies and firing veterans with impunity.

I joined the United States Army when I was seventeen years old. I was so young that my mother had to sign the paperwork. And my experience in the armed forces would lay the foundation for everything that came after: My ability to start and run my own small business; a successful tenure as the CEO of one of the largest poverty-fighting organizations in the country; being elected the 63rd Governor of Maryland and the

first Black governor in our state's history. It all started with lessons learned in the Army.

We need to nurture those lessons in others—with policies that honor our veterans' hunger to serve. This Veterans Day, President Trump and his advisors would be wise to follow what we've done in Maryland—taking a surgical approach to fiscal responsibility that protects the job market, encourages service, and uplifts our veteran community. **RF**

In this moment of profound uncertainty, we need to make it easier for our veterans to serve our country — not harder.

Wes Moore is the 63rd Governor of the State of Maryland. In 2005, Moore deployed to Afghanistan as a lieutenant with the 82nd Airborne Division, leading soldiers in combat. Governor Moore enlisted in the U.S. Army at age 17 while at Valley Forge Military Academy and College. He deployed overseas to Afghanistan with the 82nd Airborne Division from 2005 to 2006, where he achieved the rank of captain.



What Veterans Day Means to Me

"Serving my country was the greatest adventure of my life."

by TOM BARRETT

Each Veterans Day, I'm reminded of the decision I made to enlist in the Army — a decision that shaped the rest of my life. Just a few days after I graduated from high school, I boarded the first airplane ride of my life when I shipped out to basic combat training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. By Christmas Eve, I landed at my first duty assignment 9,000 miles from home in South Korea. Nine months later, everything changed when America came under attack from terrorists on 9/11. My service took me from the Korean DMZ to the cell blocks of Guantanamo Bay, the desert sands of Iraq and Kuwait, and ultimately into the cockpit of some of the most advanced helicopters in the world. Serving my country was the greatest adventure of my life.

After 9/11, the missions we trained for became reality. Then, I experienced firsthand how our wars dragged on for years, and even decades, without any sense of urgency or end goal. Through it all, heroes continued to serve and sacrifice. In the two decades following 9/11, we lost just over 7,000 American service members in conflicts across the Middle East. Each one of those losses represents a family forever changed, a future unrealized, and a debt our nation can never fully repay.

But there's another statistic that haunts me even more: During that same twenty-year period, we lost 30,000 more troops and Global War on Terrorism-era veterans to suicide. We brought them home from the battlefield, only to lose them to an enemy within — one born of trauma, isolation, and a system that failed to catch them before they fell. That cost of conflict — the total human cost of war — is often overlooked by policymakers. They too easily outsource our war fighting to other people's kids or have an unrealistic

expectation that our technological advantage will prevent any risk of harm to our own warfighters.

I ran for Congress to prevent unnecessary wars, mission creep, and undefined end goals; to achieve peace through strength; and to make good on our commitment to care for our veterans. Earlier this year, I proudly voted to repeal the open-ended 1991 and 2002 Authorizations for Use of Military Force (AUMFs) in the Middle East as part of this year's National Defense Authorization Act. Now, for those who do go abroad and fight for us, we must ensure they receive the health care, support, and opportunities they earned when they return home.

I've only been in Congress for less than a year, but I am proud that five of my bills have passed the House of Representatives to support our troops and our veterans. From the moment our young men and women sign the dotted line, to the day we lay them to rest and deliver a flag to their family, I'm committed to keeping our promise to them.

In basic training, we would recite the Soldier's Creed every night. There is a line in the creed that says, "brave soldiers of the past would be proud of me." On this Veterans Day, I can think of nothing better than to make them proud by upholding our mission for all veterans.

RF



My service took me from the Korean DMZ to the cell blocks of Guantanamo Bay, the desert sands of Iraq and Kuwait, and ultimately into the cockpit of some of the most advanced helicopters in the world.

Tom Barrett represents the 7th District of Michigan in the U.S. House of Representatives. He spent 22 years in the U.S. Army, serving in key locations around the world, including Iraq, Guantanamo Bay, Kuwait, and the Korean DMZ. He also logged over 1,000 hours flying advanced helicopters, earning numerous awards and distinctions along the way.



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What Veterans Day Means to Me

"I am reminded of those who came before me."

by GIL CISNEROS

I look back on my time in uniform very fondly. During my time in the Navy, I built lasting friendships, traveled the world, and, most importantly, created opportunities for myself that I never could have imagined.

Five days after graduating from high school, I was off to boot camp. It wasn't long after I walked off the bus at RTC San Diego that I started to wonder if I had made the right decision. But there was no turning back.

I was lucky that I met a Chief Petty Officer who saw something in me that I had not seen in myself. He recommended that I apply for a program that led to an N.R.O.T.C. scholarship. From there, I began my educational journey. By the end, I earned my bachelor's and two master's degrees — all paid for by the U.S. government.

At times, I felt like I lived the life on the recruiting poster. I led men and women as a young division officer and department head. Being able to do both a Western Pacific and a Mediterranean Deployment, I got to live my dream of sailing the world. I visited places that I know I would have never been to if it wasn't for the Navy. Don't get me wrong, it was not all fun and games. There were many long hours at sea and time in the Persian Gulf. Life at sea can be filled with round-the-clock operations and exercises, but the ordinary hardships of sea duty were truly insignificant next to the invaluable opportunities the Navy made possible. It opened doors to an academic future I never would have imagined and continues to provide young people the chance to pursue a trade, career, leadership skills, and an education.



While I take great pride in my service to our country, I am even prouder of my family's military service.

While I take great pride in my service to our country, I am even prouder of my family's military service. My father and uncles are Vietnam veterans, and both my grandfathers served in World War II. While I knew my father served in the Army when I was a child, he very rarely ever spoke of his experience. There would be an occasional boot camp story and that was

it. Over the years, things have changed. Today, he proudly wears his Vietnam Veteran's hat and displays his veteran's pins, but he still is very reluctant to speak about his time in Vietnam. Like many of his generation, my father has silently borne the burdens of war, and he went decades without treatment from the side effects of Agent Orange exposure and undiagnosed PTSD, carrying the invisible costs of service long after the battles have ended.

When I look at my father, I see not only him but also the millions of veterans who deserve to be treated with dignity and respect for the immeasurable sacrifices they made. No veteran should be denied care for mental health, toxic exposure, or any other lasting damage from serving our country.

It's these lived experiences that still guide me. They're why when I came to Congress in 2019, one of my first actions was to sign onto the *PACT Act*, a landmark piece of legislation aimed at ensuring veterans affected by burn pits can receive treatment for the lasting damage caused by toxic exposure. Furthermore, they're why I reinvigorated the Military Mental Health Caucus earlier this year, with the goal to ensure servicemembers and veterans have access to the mental health services they deserve.

At the Pentagon, I had the privilege of serving in an Administration that made caring for our veterans a top priority. As the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness at the Pentagon, I worked closely with the VA to push for the implementation of the electronic health records. Every veteran should have access to VA healthcare upon separation from active duty and having DoD and the VA on the electronic health records should ensure a continuation of care without disruption, and make it more likely that each individual will continue to seek care.

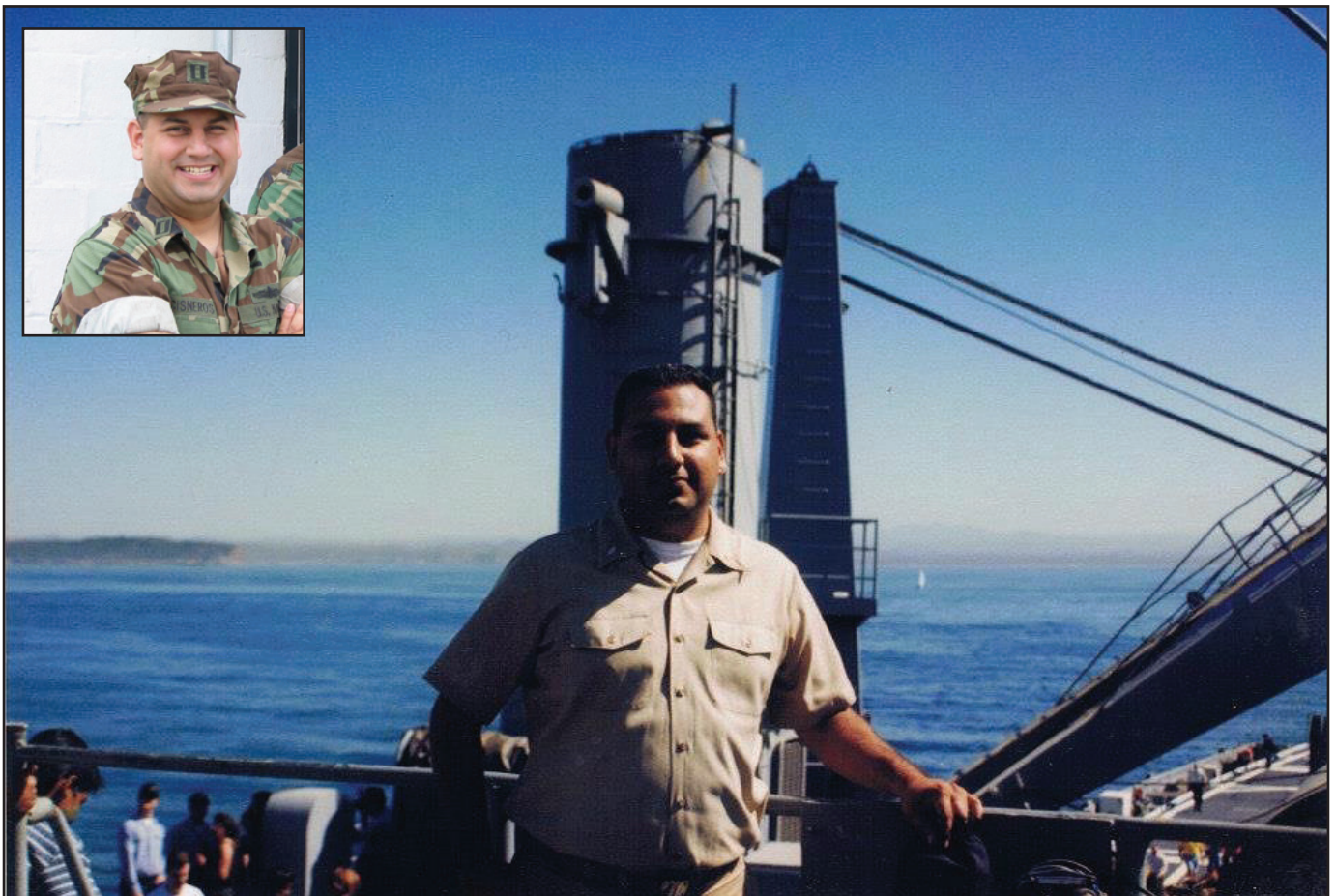
This Veterans Day, I am reminded of those who came before me, my family members who inspired me to serve, the mentors that invested in me and guided me in my career, and the brothers and sisters in uniform who became lifelong friends. At the same time, I also think of the future generations of servicemembers and

the legacy we are called to build for them — a legacy built on better healthcare, better conditions, and better outcomes for all servicemembers and veterans. Our veterans have earned nothing less than our absolute best, and it is our duty to deliver it. **RF**

**When I look at my father,
I see not only him but also the
millions of veterans who deserve
to be treated with dignity and respect
for the immeasurable sacrifices
they made.**

Born and raised in Southern California, Rep. Gil Cisneros proudly represents California's 31st Congressional District. He serves on the House Armed Services Committee and Committee on Small Business. Rep. Cisneros is a former Naval Officer and Former Under

Secretary of Defense. Through ten years of service to our country as a U.S. Naval Officer, Rep. Cisneros was awarded the Navy Commendation Medal, Navy Achievement Medal, the National Defense Medal, and the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal for his exemplary service to his country.



What Veterans Day Means to Me

“It’s about recommitting ourselves to the future.”

by GABE EVANS

As Veterans Day approaches, I pause to reflect on what it means to wear the uniform of the United States. For me, service has always been more than a calling — it has been part of my family’s story and my own journey as an American.

My Abuelo, Cuauhtemoc Chavez, was born in Mexico and legally earned his American citizenship through military service during World War II. He joined the U.S. Army in 1943 as a teenager and fought for Patton’s 3rd Army. He was wounded twice, once in 1944 and again in 1945, and was awarded the Purple Heart for both these injuries. His sacrifice taught me at a young age that being an American is not only a privilege, but also a responsibility.

My paternal grandfather, Greg Evans, was a career naval aviator who ultimately commanded one of the largest squadrons on the East Coast. He reiterated the same lessons: love your country and never forget the privilege of being an American. He gave me my love of flying and emphasized the importance of taking care of your troops.

My grandparents’ service instilled in me that loving our country means being willing to protect and sacrifice for it. When I joined the Army, Grandpa Evans administered my oath. I went on to serve 12 years — including a combat deployment to the Middle East as a part of the Global War on Terror during Operation Enduring Freedom, and in the Colorado Army National Guard as a Black Hawk helicopter pilot. Each day I served alongside men and

women who put their lives on the line for our nation.

I later came home to wear a different uniform — that of a police officer in my home state. Whether it was in a combat zone abroad or on the streets of Colorado, I saw that success is not just about the individual.

Wearing the uniform alongside your brothers and sisters creates an understanding that you are a part of something bigger than yourself.

That unity, service, and mission first mindset is what Veterans Day means to me. It is a day to honor those who placed country above self, and a reminder for each of us to daily live out those values. In a time when our country often feels divided, our veterans remind us that teamwork and sacrifice are not abstract ideals. They are lived values that unite America and ensure our leadership on the global stage.

Now as a congressman representing Colorado’s 8th District, I continue to carry those virtues with me. Serving in Congress is not about titles or politics. It is about working as a team with colleagues on both sides of the aisle to secure America’s shared future. When we come together with purpose,

we can achieve extraordinary things.

One of my proudest efforts in Congress has been the *Benefits that Endure for Lifetimes of Service (BELOS) Act* — named in honor of Marc Belo, a fellow veteran, aviation legend, and my friend who I had the great honor of serving with until his untimely passing. Veterans and their families will tell you that service to the nation takes many forms. However, that means



Wearing the uniform alongside your brothers and sisters creates an understanding that you are a part of something bigger than yourself.

sacrifice takes many forms too. The *BELOS Act* honors our nation's fallen heroes and their loved ones by expanding free lifetime access to National Parks to the families of veterans who pass away from a service-related illness or accident – patriots like Marc.

For me, Veterans Day is not just about looking back. It's about recommitting ourselves to the future — to make sure the next generation of service members knows their country has their back, and to ensure veterans and their families receive the care, the respect, and the opportunities they have rightfully earned.

Every year, I mark this day with my family, my fellow veterans, and my community, sharing the stories and memories that remind us why our service matters. Every year I am reminded of the same truth:

In a time when our country often feels divided, our veterans remind us that teamwork and sacrifice are not abstract ideals.

our veterans never let America down. As a veteran and now member of Congress, I must ensure our country does the same.

On this Veterans Day, let's remember that the freedoms we enjoy were secured by ordinary Americans who paid an extraordinary price. **RF**

Gabe Evans represents the 8th District of Colorado in the U.S. House of Representatives. He served 12 years in the U.S. Army, where he completed a

combat deployment to the Middle East and served in Operation Enduring Freedom, ultimately reaching the rank of Captain. He later served in the Colorado Army National Guard, where he was a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter pilot and company commander responding to wildfires and search and rescues.





States and Districts VETERANS SERVING IN

(By state,
alphabetically)

Sen. Dan Sullivan (AK)
U.S. Marine Corps

Rep. Barry Moore (AL-01)
U.S. Army

Sen. Tom Cotton (AR)
U.S. Army

Rep. Rick Crawford (AR-01)
U.S. Army

Rep. Steve Womack (AR-03)
U.S. Army

Sen. Ruben Gallego (AZ)
U.S. Marine Corps

Sen. Mark Kelly (AZ)
U.S. Navy

Rep. Eli Crane (AZ-02)
U.S. Navy

Rep. Abraham Hamadeh (AZ-08)
U.S. Army Reserve

Rep. Mike Thompson (CA-04)
U.S. Army

Rep. Jimmy Panetta (CA-19)
U.S. Navy

Rep. Salud Carbajal (CA-24)
U.S. Marine Corps Reserve

Rep. Gilbert Cisneros, Jr. (CA-31)
U.S. Navy

Rep. Ted Lieu (CA-36)
U.S. Air Force

Rep. Darrell Issa (CA-48)
U.S. Army

Rep. Jason Crow (CO-06)
U.S. Army

Rep. Gabe Evans (CO-08)
U.S. Army/NG

Sen. Richard Blumenthal (CT)
U.S. Marine Corps Reserve

Sen. Rick Scott (FL)
U.S. Navy

Rep. Neal Dunn (FL-02)
U.S. Army

Rep. Cory Mills (FL-07)
U.S. Army

Rep. Anna Paulina Luna (FL-13)
U.S. Air Force

Rep. Vern Buchanan (FL-16)
U.S. Air National Guard

Rep. Greg Steube (FL-17)
U.S. Army

Rep. Scott Franklin (FL-18)
U.S. Navy

Rep. Brian Mast (FL-21)
U.S. Army

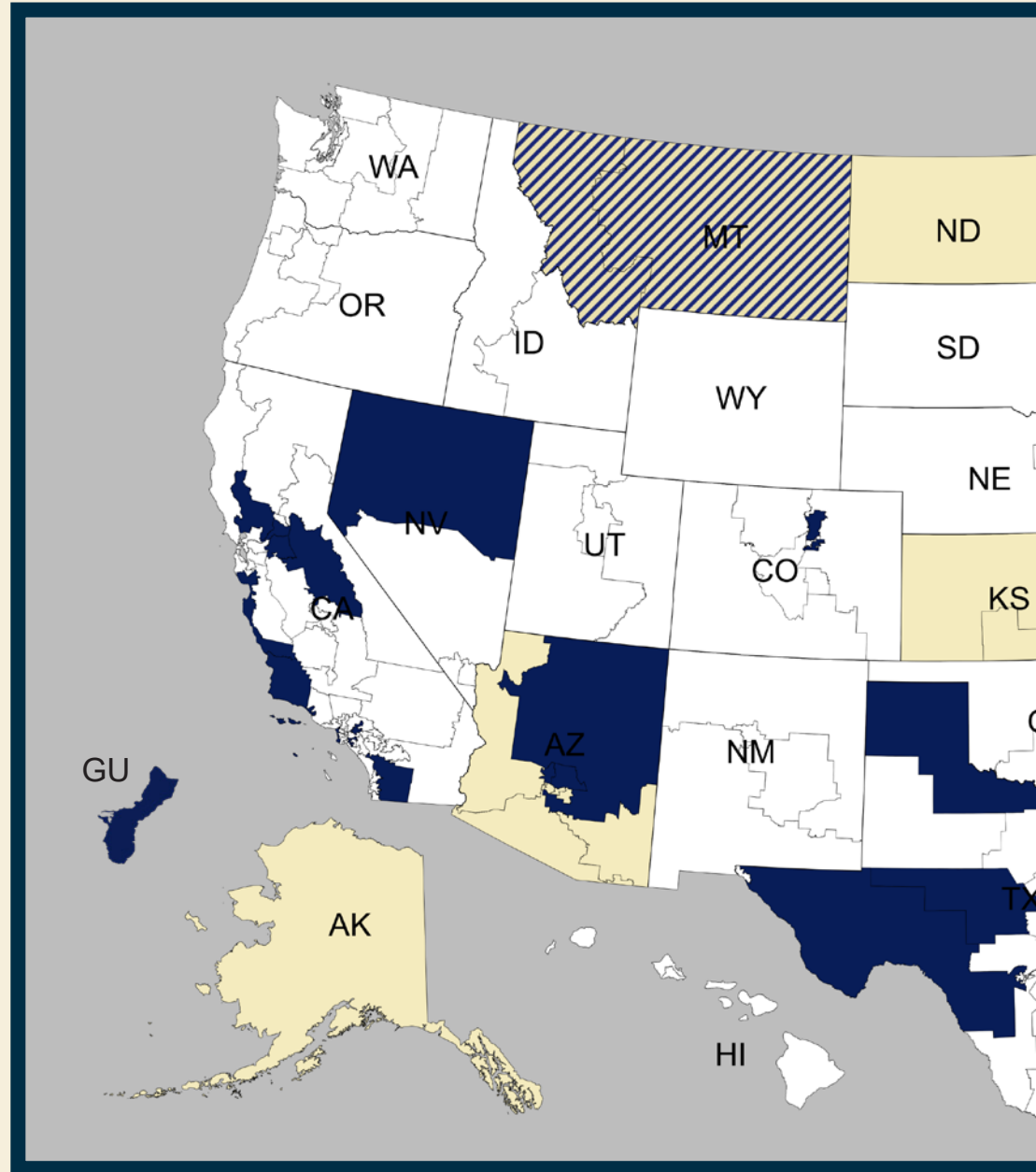
Rep. Sanford Bishop, Jr. (GA-02)
U.S. Army

Rep. Rich McCormick (GA-07)
U.S. Marine Corps

Rep. Andrew Clyde (GA-09)
U.S. Navy

Rep. Barry Loudermilk (GA-11)
U.S. Air Force

Rep. James Moylan (Guam)
U.S. Army



Sen. Tammy Duckworth (IL)
U.S. Army

Rep. Mike Bost (IL-12)
U.S. Marine Corps

Sen. Jim Banks (IN)
U.S. Navy Reserve

Sen. Todd Young (IN)
U.S. Marine Corps

Rep. Jim Baird (IN-04)
U.S. Army

Sen. Joni Ernst (IA)
U.S. Army

Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks (IA-01)
U.S. Army

Rep. Zachary Nunn (IA-03)
U.S. Air Force

Sen. Roger Marshall (KS)
U.S. Army

Sen. Mitch McConnell (KY)
U.S. Army

Rep. Brett Guthrie (KY-02)
U.S. Army

Rep. Hal Rogers (KY-05)
U.S. Army

Rep. Clay Higgins (LA-03)
U.S. Army

Sen. Ed Markey (MA)
U.S. Army

Rep. Jake Auchincloss (MA)
U.S. Marine Corps

Rep. Seth Moulton (MA)
U.S. Marine Corps

Rep. Andy Haaland (NM)
U.S. Navy

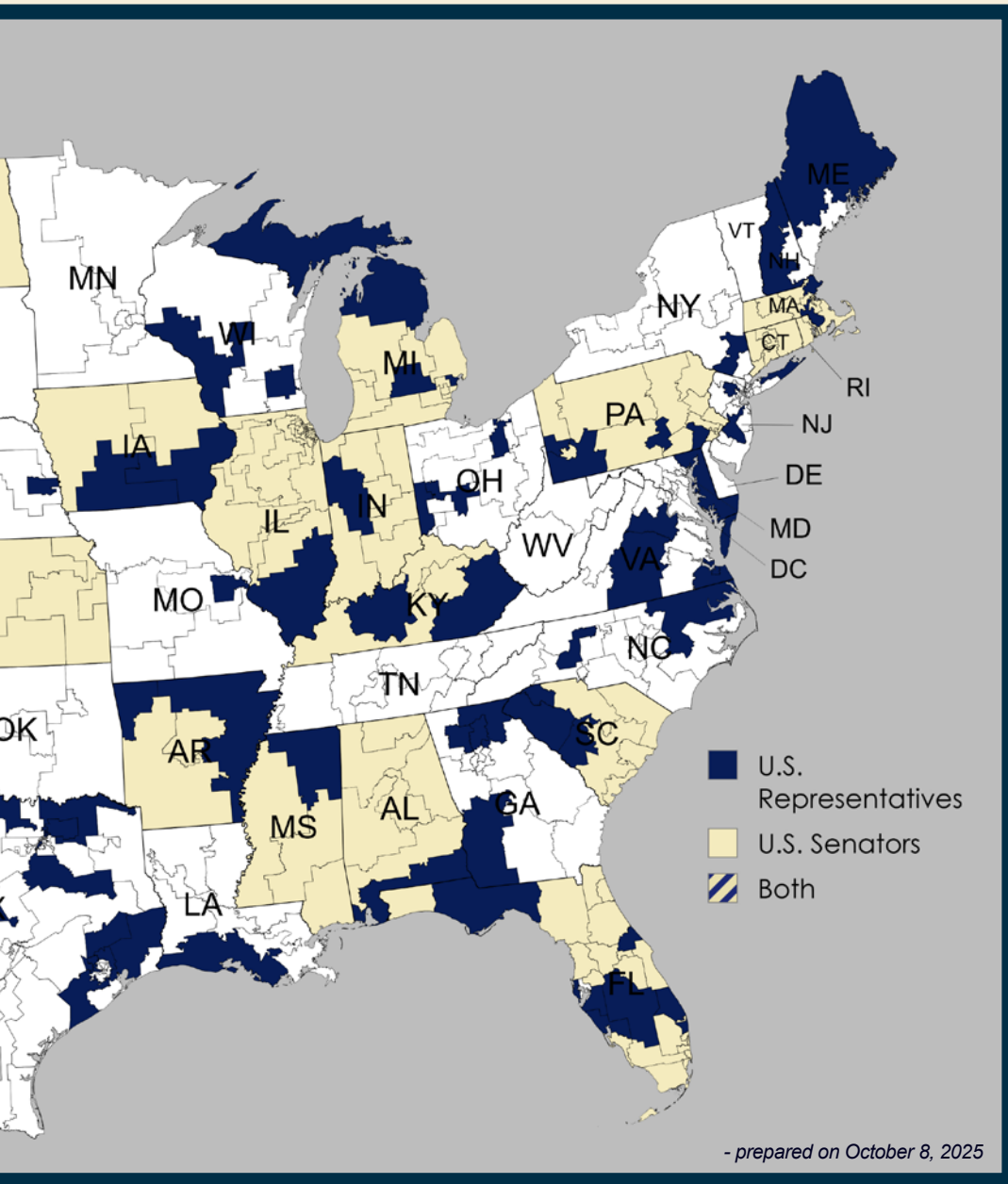
Rep. Jared Gohmert (TX)
U.S. Marine Corps

Sen. Gary Peters (MI)
U.S. Navy

Rep. Jack Bergman (CA)
U.S. Marine Corps

Rep. Tom Barr (TX)
U.S. Army

ts Represented by THE 119TH CONGRESS



ncloss (MA-04)
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gman (MI-01)
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rrett (MI-07)
rmy

Rep. John James (MI-10)
U.S. Army
Rep. Trent Kelly (MS-01)
U.S. Army
Sen. Roger Wicker (MS)
U.S. Air Force
Sen. Tim Sheehy (MT)
U.S. Navy
Rep. Ryan Zinke (MT-01)
U.S. Navy
Rep. Troy Downing (MT-02)
U.S. Air Force
Rep. Don Bacon (NE-02)
U.S. Air Force

Rep. Maggie Goodlander (NH-02)
U.S. Navy
Rep. Herbert Conaway, Jr. (NJ-03)
U.S. Air Force
Rep. Mikie Sherrill (NJ-11)
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Rep. Mark Amodei (NV-02)
U.S. Army
Rep. Nick LaLota (NY-01)
U.S. Navy
Rep. Pat Ryan (NY-18)
U.S. Army
Rep. Donald Davis (NC-01)
U.S. Air Force

Rep. Pat Harrigan (NC-10)
U.S. Army
Rep. Max Miller (OH-07)
U.S. Marine Corps
Rep. Warren Davidson (OH-08)
U.S. Army
Rep. Mike Carey (OH-15)
U.S. Army
Sen. Dave McCormick (PA)
U.S. Army
Rep. Chrissy Houlahan (PA-06)
U.S. Air Force
Rep. Scott Perry (PA-10)
U.S. Army
Rep. Guy Reschenthaler (PA-14)
U.S. Navy
Rep. Christopher Deluzio (PA-17)
U.S. Navy
Sen. Jack Reed (RI)
U.S. Army
Sen. Lindsey Graham (SC)
U.S. Air Force
Rep. Joe Wilson (SC-02)
U.S. Army
Rep. Sheri Biggs (SC-03)
U.S. Air National Guard
Rep. William Timmons (SC-04)
U.S. Army
Rep. Daniel Crenshaw (TX-02)
U.S. Navy
Rep. Keith Self (TX-03)
U.S. Army
Rep. Pat Fallon (TX-04)
U.S. Air Force
Rep. Jake Ellzey (TX-06)
U.S. Navy
Rep. Morgan Luttrell (TX-08)
U.S. Navy
Rep. August Pfluger (TX-11)
U.S. Air Force
Rep. Ronny Jackson (TX-13)
U.S. Navy
Rep. Troy Nehls (TX-22)
U.S. Army Reserve
Rep. Tony Gonzales (TX-23)
U.S. Navy
Rep. Brian Babin (TX-36)
U.S. Air Force
Rep. Wesley Hunt (TX-38)
U.S. Army
Rep. Jen Kiggans (VA-02)
U.S. Navy
Rep. Bobby Scott (VA-03)
U.S. Army
Rep. John McGuire, III (VA-05)
U.S. Navy
Rep. Eugene Vindman (VA-07)
U.S. Army
Rep. Derrick Van Orden (WI-03)
U.S. Navy
Rep. Scott Fitzgerald (WI-05)
U.S. Army

What Veterans Day Means to Me

“Service to our country always comes before service to any party.”

by MAGGIE GOODLANDER

New Hampshire’s mid-November air is crisp and carries a certain stillness — a calm before the first storms of winter. On Veterans Day, that stillness and calm take me back to the very beginning. New Hampshire is the home of the American Revolution, home of the United States Constitution, and my family’s home for more than a century. Here we live by our motto: “Live Free or Die.”

You see and hear a love of country everywhere you go in New Hampshire — from the granite memorials honoring fallen heroes that stand at the heart of nearly every town and city across our state to the sounds of bugles playing the twenty-four notes of Taps that play each and every summer night in our State Veterans Cemetery.

The stillness and calm of Veterans Day take me back to my own decision to serve, a decision rooted in the values I learned growing up here: community, citizenship, and the belief that our democracy is not something you watch from the sidelines. And I’m reminded of a lesson I learned not in uniform, but in the swimming pool at the Nashua YMCA. As a kid, I was a terrible swimmer and struggled to pass even the most basic swim test. But I made a promise to my dad Ted, a proud veteran of the United States Navy, that I would stick with it. And that childhood lesson in perseverance was foundational years later when I had to pass the United States Navy’s swim test to become an intelligence officer in the United States Navy Reserve.

For more than a decade, I had the honor of wearing our nation’s uniform and working alongside Americans from

every conceivable background. Our differences — whether rooted in geography, politics, or faith — faded away in the face of a shared mission and the deep-seated trust that you build with the person to your left and your right who has also raised their hand and taken an oath, not to a person or a party, but to the Constitution of the United States of America.

Veterans Day is a profound and personal reminder for us, as Americans, to reflect on the sacred promise we made to care for our veterans, servicemembers, and military families.

Honoring this sacred promise is not a partisan exercise. It is an American imperative. I learned this from Senator John McCain, a true American hero who showed me that service to our country always comes before service to any party. That is the spirit I’m working to bring to the United States Congress every day.

This sacred promise must be expressed in meaningful policy by the United States Congress. When we empower our veterans, we are not just delivering what is deserved — we are making a strategic investment in our nation’s economy and future competitiveness.

That’s why I am proud to work hand-in-hand with my Republican colleagues in Congress to lead commonsense legislation to help veterans translate their world-class military experience into college credits. It’s a practical solution that honors our veterans by saving them — and the American taxpayer — time and money entering America’s

workforce. Service takes a toll — both mentally and physically. That’s why I am helping lead common-sense and bipartisan legislation that will cut the red tape that has



The stillness and calm of Veterans Day take me back to my own decision to serve, a decision rooted in the values I learned growing up here: community, citizenship, and the belief that our democracy is not something you watch from the sidelines.

prevented our disabled veterans from getting the medically necessary equipment they need to travel safely.

Our sacred promise and shared mission extend to military families, who are the backbone and beating heart of our all-volunteer force. It is a matter of basic fairness that military families have the same access to healthcare as their civilian neighbors. That's why I am helping to lead a bipartisan bill to allow military kids to stay on their parents' healthcare until they turn 26, just like on private insurance plans. We cannot expect to recruit and retain the world's finest fighting force if we do not provide for their families.

Freedom is not free. No one knows that more than our servicemembers, veterans, and military families. Honoring them requires more than a parade or a plaque on a single day in November. It requires the daily, bipartisan work of ensuring the American Dream is theirs. This is our sacred

promise, shared mission, and a measure of our character as a nation. On this Veterans Day, let's honor our sacred promise and recommit ourselves to that shared mission. May God bless our troops, and may God bless the United States of America.

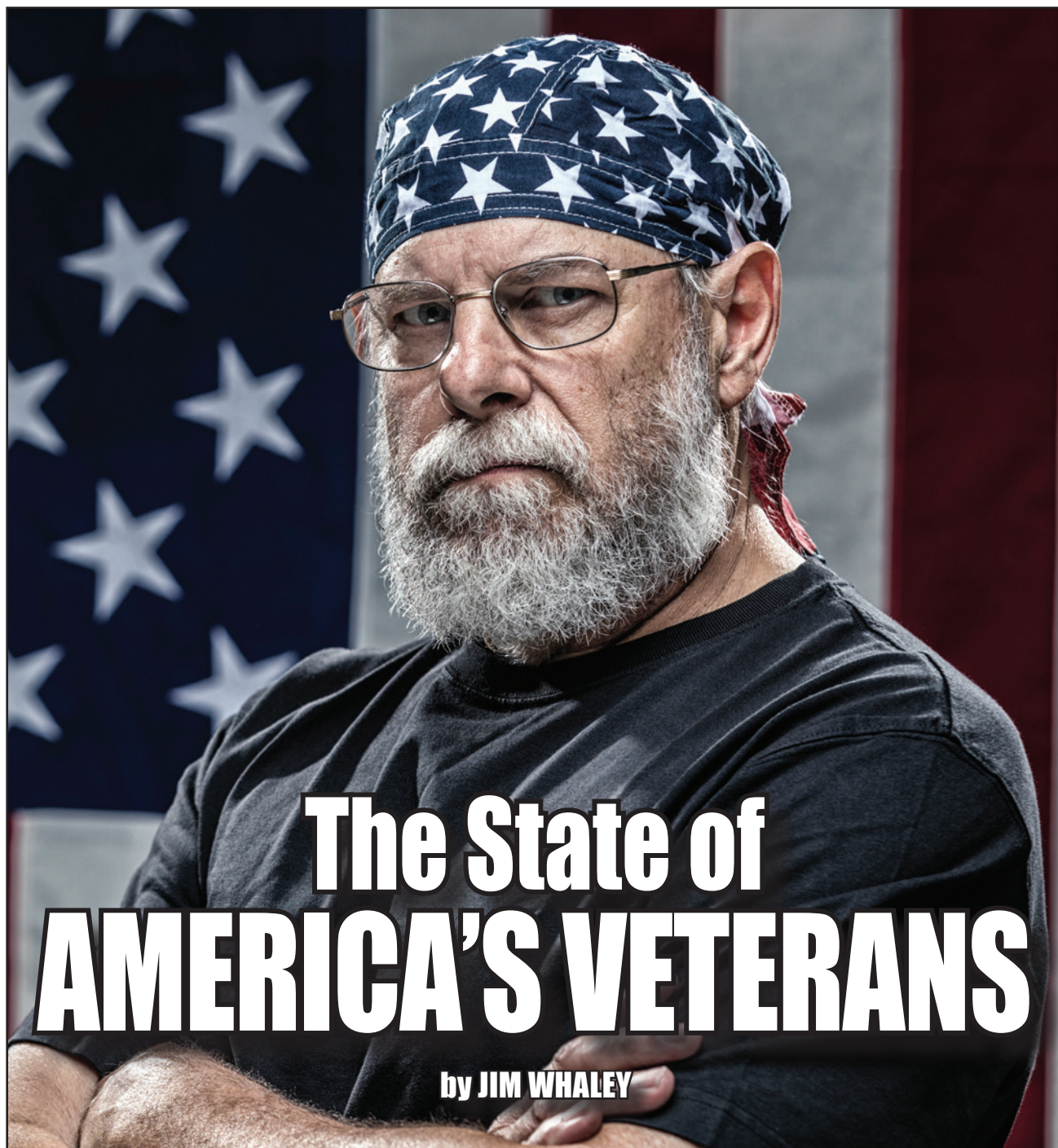
RF

**When we empower our veterans,
we are not just delivering what is
deserved — we are making a strategic
investment in our nation's economy
and future competitiveness.**

Congresswoman Maggie Goodlander has dedicated her life to public service. Before taking the oath of office to represent New Hampshire in the United States House of Representatives, she served as a foreign policy advisor to Senators John

McCain and Joe Lieberman in the United States Senate. Congresswoman Maggie Goodlander served in the United States Navy Reserve as an intelligence officer for over a decade, holding the rank of Lieutenant. She brings the experience from her 11 years of service to her work in the United States Congress every single day.





Veterans Day is a time to honor those who served. But the truest measure of how a nation honors its veterans is not in ceremonies or speeches — it's in whether we listen to them, not only on November 11, but every day of the year. Veteran voices have shaped some of the most consequential policies of the past decade, from expanding toxic exposure care to transforming how we approach suicide prevention.

The veteran community itself is changing. It is smaller now than at any point in modern history, yet more diverse, more complex, and facing new challenges that demand

urgent attention. As their numbers continue to decline, their voices must not fade from our national priorities. The strength of our nation depends, in no small part, on how well we support those who have given so much defending it.

A Changing Community

Today, there are about 17.5 million veterans in the United States, representing roughly 6–7 percent of the adult population. That's a dramatic shift from the decades

following World War II, when veterans made up 10–15 percent of U.S. adults. By 2040, that share is projected to drop below 5 percent, and the total veteran population is expected to fall to around 13 million.

As the community shrinks, it is also becoming more diverse. Roughly 19 percent of veterans are now people of color, compared to less than 10 percent in 2000, and the number of women veterans is steadily rising, expected to make up nearly 18 percent of the total by 2040. Veterans are also geographically dispersed: about 4.7 million, more than one quarter of all veterans, live in rural communities, where access to healthcare, transportation, and employment can be especially challenging. Ensuring that these veterans are not left behind requires sustained attention to the unique barriers created by distance, limited infrastructure, and fewer providers.

The population is also aging. Nearly half of all veterans are over the age of 65, and more than 40 percent live with a service-connected disability. Many are managing the long-term physical and mental health consequences of service, from chronic pain and toxic exposure to post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury. These realities shape the kind of care, support, and policy solutions they need.

Health and Well-Being

Access to quality, timely healthcare remains a defining challenge. While the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provides care to millions, about half of all veterans are not connected to the VA or a veteran service organization. That gap means many veterans are navigating the civilian healthcare system, where knowledge of military-related conditions can be limited and continuity of care can suffer.

Mission Roll Call's polling reflects this concern. In our 2026 priorities survey, 65 percent of veterans identified access to quality healthcare as one of their top concerns. Rural veterans face particular challenges, often traveling long distances or waiting weeks for appointments.

Policymakers are beginning to respond. The *PACT Act* — the most significant expansion of VA healthcare in decades — extended care and benefits to millions of veterans exposed to burn pits and other toxins. The *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act* and the SSG Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program expanded community-based prevention efforts and emphasized a public health approach to suicide. And the proposed *ACCESS Act* seeks to expand veterans' timely access to care by strengthening eligibility standards for community care, improving oversight of mental health and residential treatment programs, and giving veterans

greater choice and transparency in navigating VA and non-VA providers.

Still, gaps remain. More than 6,000 veterans die by suicide each year, a rate significantly higher than their civilian peers. Stigma, long wait times, and insufficient mental health services are common barriers. In our surveys, 57 percent of veterans ranked mental health care and suicide prevention as a top priority. Strengthening those community connections and ensuring veterans in every ZIP code can access timely, high-quality care will be essential in the years ahead.

Economic Security and Transition

Economic stability is another pillar of veteran well-being. As of 2025, the veteran unemployment rate officially hovers around 3.1 percent, slightly lower than the national average. Yet employment quality remains a concern.

Our data shows that 73 percent of veterans accepted the first job available after leaving the military rather than one aligned with their skills or passions. This mismatch often contributes to lower job satisfaction and higher turnover. Broader research underscores the same trend, with many veterans leaving their first civilian job within the first two years because it fails to match their skills or expectations. We are

continuing to gather updated data on this complex issue, but the evidence shows that transition challenges remain a central barrier to long-term stability.

Employment is deeply tied to successful reintegration. When veterans find meaningful work that uses their skills, they are more likely to thrive in other areas of life, including mental health and personal relationships. That's why programs focused on workforce development, credential transfer, and employer education are critical to long-term success.

Housing and Stability

Homelessness and housing insecurity remains an urgent issue. The most recent Point-in-Time (PIT) count found more than 33,000 veterans experience homelessness on a single night, a figure that has declined by about 55 percent since 2010 but remains far too high. And even that number is only a floor, not a ceiling. The PIT Count provides a snapshot, but it misses many veterans: those hidden in remote or rural areas; those temporarily staying with friends or in motels; those unwilling to disclose their status; or parents — often mothers — who avoid visibility to protect their children. The fact is that no veteran or their family should be without a home.

...about 4.7 million, more than one quarter of all veterans, live in rural communities, where access to healthcare, transportation, and employment can be especially challenging.

Community-based programs funded by the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program and collaborations between VA and local partners have been instrumental in reducing homelessness, but sustained investment and innovative approaches are needed to reach veterans who remain outside traditional systems of care.

The Road Ahead

The veteran population is changing and facing new challenges that cannot be addressed with outdated approaches. But one thing has not changed: veterans continue to serve as a source of strength, leadership, and resilience for this nation.

As we look to the future, the measure of how well we honor their service will not be in how loudly we speak about them, but in how closely we listen to them

— and how boldly we act on what we hear. Their voices, combined with data and lived experience, must guide the next generation of policies that safeguard their health, well-being, and economic security.

At Mission Roll Call, we believe every veteran's story, experience, and opinion matters. Veterans represent every walk of American life. What unites them is that each has done their duty to protect our nation and uphold the Constitution. When veterans speak, policies shift, systems improve, and lives are

saved. We're listening, and we're making sure those voices are heard where it matters most.

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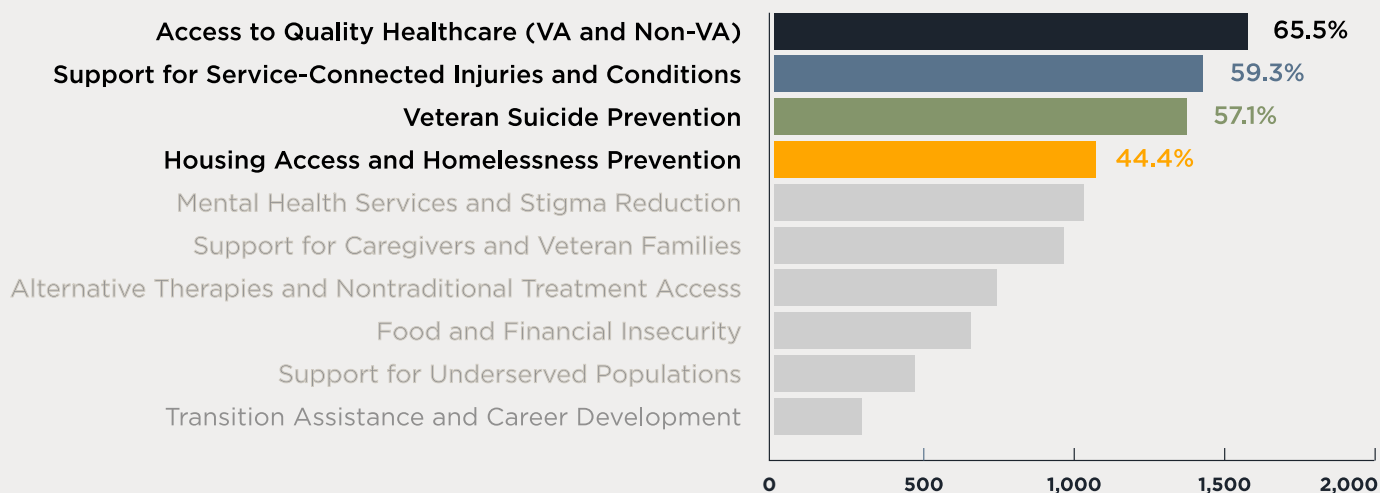
Jim Whaley is the CEO of Mission Roll Call and is a 20-year veteran of the United States Army.

In our surveys, 57 percent of veterans ranked mental health care and suicide prevention as a top priority.



MRC 2026 Priorities CHOSEN BY YOU

Each year, we invite veterans, their families, and supporters to help shape Mission Roll Call's priorities for the year ahead. For 2026, more than 2,400 of you shared your voices and perspectives. The image below highlights the top four areas you want us to prioritize.



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Service, Trust, and the Future of American Democracy

by RYE BARCOTT

Currently, only 4 percent of Americans have a “great deal” of confidence in Congress. That dismal number highlights a deep and growing trust gap between citizens and their elected representatives. It’s not hard to see why.

Threats of a government shutdown have become an annual tradition. The 118th Congress, which concluded on January 3, 2025, was the least productive Congress since at least the 1980s. And polarization has roiled the American public, resulting in politically motivated violence against liberals and conservatives alike. Against this backdrop of dysfunction, the question becomes: what sources of leadership can still inspire confidence and unify Americans?

When I left the Marine Corps, I took with me a conviction that I hold to this day: even after the uniform comes off, veterans have an obligation to continue serving our country.

That belief shaped the founding of With Honor, an organization dedicated to advancing principled, elected veteran leadership, alongside my fellow Marine Corps veteran Peter Dixon and David Gergen, a Navy veteran and preeminent statesman who had served in presidential administrations of both parties.

At David’s urging, we committed to grounding our work in data, ensuring that our assumptions about veterans’ impact on public trust and leadership could withstand real scrutiny, which led us to partner with Gallup to rigorously test how Americans perceive

veterans.

The poll, conducted with more than 2,000 Americans this summer, reveals something extraordinary in a divided time: strong majorities of Americans trust veterans to put country ahead of party, to bridge divides, and to lead in crisis.



Rye Barcott

The poll, conducted with more than 2,000 Americans this summer, reveals something extraordinary in a divided time: majorities of Americans trust veterans to put country ahead of party, to bridge divides, and to lead in crisis.

These findings are not only statistically significant, but also culturally significant. In an era where cynicism about government is pervasive, the perception of veterans as trusted, mission-driven leaders represents one of the few bipartisan points of agreement left in American politics. That trust is not automatic; it is earned through experiences of service, sacrifice, and teamwork under pressure. It also reflects a hunger in the electorate for leaders who embody humility and accountability, qualities often absent in today’s political theater.

At a moment when confidence in our government is near historic lows, these findings underscore a truth many of us know from experience: veterans bring not just competence, but credibility and humility needed to restore faith in our institutions.

The Numbers Speak Loudly

Statistics alone do not restore trust, but they point toward a path worth pursuing. According to the With Honor-Gallup poll:

-55 percent of Americans are more likely to vote for a candidate with military service, more than a candidate with government or business backgrounds.

-83 percent of Americans believe veterans have strong leadership skills.

-78 percent of Americans trust veterans to put country before party.

-77 percent of Americans say veterans work well with individuals with diverse backgrounds.

-75 percent of Americans believe veterans understand complex global security issues.

These are not abstractions. They reflect what Americans crave: leaders who rise above partisanship, who know the value of sacrifice, and who have proven their ability to unify across differences.

Importantly, this trust cuts across demographic and partisan lines. Whether Democrat, Republican, or Independent, Americans consistently expressed higher confidence in veterans than in almost any other category of public leader. This suggests that veterans occupy a rare position in our fractured civic landscape: they can serve as connective tissue between groups that otherwise view each other with suspicion. That bridging capacity may be one of the most valuable resources we have for renewing democracy.

Proof in Action: The For Country Caucus

The For Country Caucus, a bipartisan group of 37 military veteran lawmakers, was founded on these very insights. Members have taken a pledge to meet across party lines, build trust, and advance legislation that strengthens national security, supports veterans and their families, and expands opportunities for national service.

And they deliver. Together, Republicans and Democrats have:

- Authorized the Global War on Terrorism Memorial on the National Mall.
- Led the Military Quality of Life Panel, which yielded a 10% pay raise for service members most vulnerable to food insecurity.
- Instituted an improved process for service members to seek mental health support.
- Passed key provisions to strengthen our nation's cybersecurity, position the Department of Defense to adopt emerging technologies like AI and biotechnology, and identify and address critical supply chain vulnerabilities.

Symbolism matters too. Each Memorial Day, members gather to wash the Vietnam Veterans Memorial together. This past spring, the Co-Chairs of the caucus, Rep. Jake Ellzey, a Republican from Texas, and Rep. Don Davis, a Democrat from North Carolina, stood shoulder to shoulder, cleaning the wall. Their message was clear: for veterans, this country is still worth setting

aside politics in pursuit of shared ideals.

These acts may seem small compared to landmark legislation, but they are deeply resonant. They demonstrate that unity is not only possible, but it is already happening in pockets of Congress where veterans are leading. By modeling respect, discipline, and a mission-first ethos, the For Country Caucus provides a glimpse of what politics could look like if service, rather than self-interest, were the organizing principle.

A Call to Renew Service

If Americans are searching for proof that democracy can be repaired, the experience of veterans in public life offers both evidence and inspiration. Our country faces a legitimacy crisis. Too many doubt that the government can function, let alone represent them. Our poll indicates that veterans continue to hold the public's trust. We cannot squander it.

We must encourage more veterans to engage in civic life. We should support caucuses like the For Country Caucus that model bipartisan compromise and principled leadership. And we should expand national service so more young Americans, whether uniformed or not, gain the perspective that

comes from putting country above self.

The findings affirm what I have long believed: service is the antidote to division. Veterans are not immune to politics, but they carry experiences that Americans overwhelmingly trust. That trust is precious, and we must use it to restore confidence in our institutions, to show the world that America can still unite and prove, together, that patriotism will always outlast politics.

RF

Rye Barcott is co-founder and CEO of With Honor, a nonprofit and political action committee that fights polarization in Congress by recruiting, electing, and supporting principled veterans who pledge to serve with integrity, civility, and courage across party lines. Together, the nearly 50 Members of Congress that With Honor Action supports have passed more than 250 bipartisan laws focused on national security, national service, and veterans affairs. Barcott served in the U.S. Marine Corps in Fallujah, Iraq, is the author of "It Happened on the Way to War," and cofounder of the investment firm Double Time Capital. He is a graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill, Harvard Business School, and Harvard Kennedy School.

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The Quiet Strength of Military Spouses

by KATHY ROTH-DOUQUET

When people think of military service, they often picture uniforms, deployments, and acts of heroism overseas. That service however, is made possible by the military family — the spouses, the children, the parents, who are the life support system for the service member. That military spouse plays out their service every day across homes, schools, and neighborhoods, far from family and friends, facing their own struggles, often without the support they need. At Blue Star Families, the nation's largest nonprofit supporting military and veteran families, we recognize that the strength of the nation is its military, and the strength of our military is the service member. The strength of the service member, however, is their families. Then who — who — will be the strength of the military family? It must be us, all of us.

Take the Love family, a Navy family with nearly two decades of service and nine moves. Their children have attended six different schools. This year, they relocated from Rhode Island to Mayport, Florida. Just days after arriving, Leah Love's husband checked into his command — only to be flown out to meet his ship already at sea. By the weekend, his brief assignment had become a full deployment. The boxes were barely unpacked. Leah was alone. Again.

A typical day for families like the Loves means balancing parenting, work, and the complicated logistics of each new posting. School enrollment isn't just paperwork; it means navigating vaccine records, athletic eligibility, and ensuring continuity for children constantly playing the "new kid." When her sons wanted to try out for cross country, Leah hit repeated roadblocks scheduling an alternate tryout.

She ultimately invoked the Military Interstate Children's Compact (MIC3), which guarantees fair school transitions for military kids, to ensure her sons got a fair shot. Even well-intentioned communities can make transitions harder without understanding or flexibility.



Kathy Roth-Douquet

The strength of the nation is its military, and the strength of our military is the service member. The strength of the service member, however, is their families.

Stories like the Loves' are all too common. Each year, hundreds of thousands of military families face similar challenges — constant moves, job disruptions, and the daily effort to rebuild community and belonging.

And these daily challenges unfold against a backdrop of mounting financial strain.

According to the 2024 Blue Star Families Military Family Lifestyle Survey, 77 percent of active-duty families say having two incomes is vital to their financial well-being, up sharply from 63 percent in 2019. Yet frequent moves, childcare shortages, and licensing barriers make sustaining dual incomes difficult. Childcare also remains one of the most pressing issues. The survey also found that 68 percent of active-duty spouses need childcare to work, but more than a third cannot find care that meets their needs. Nearly half say it simply doesn't exist where they live. The result: families lose income, children lose stability,

and service members lose focus — putting mission readiness at risk.

Yet, there's opportunity. Communities that welcome military families strengthen their own neighborhoods. Military spouses are teachers, nurses, business leaders, PTA volunteers, and coaches. Their kids bring diversity and resilience to classrooms. Their families pay taxes, join churches, shop locally, and give back in ways that make towns stronger. But they can only do this if we meet them halfway.

That’s why Congress and the Administration must act now to:

-Strengthen MIC3 implementation nationwide. Ensure military children have consistent, equitable access to schools and athletics across all states by fully enforcing the MIC3.

-Expand quality-of-life provisions in the FY26 NDAA. Quality of life directly impacts mission readiness. Building on the progress made in FY25, Congress should pass Representative Chrissy Houlahan’s (D-PA) proposal to extend childcare fee assistance to in-home providers and guarantee families at least one year’s notice if the program is ever discontinued – giving them time to plan and adjust.

-Prioritize employment portability and flexibility. Encourage employers to adopt the 4+1 Commitment: The Formula for Military Spouse Success. This proven approach supports job transferability, remote work options, flexible hours, and paid PCS leave – helping families stay financially stable between moves.

-Raise the cap on Dependent Care Flexible Spending Accounts. The current \$5,000 cap hasn’t changed in 35 years. Doubling it to \$10,500 would better reflect today’s realities and give families meaningful financial

relief.

These aren’t aspirational goals. They’re urgent, actionable, bipartisan solutions that would immediately improve daily life for families who serve.

Blue Star Families’ *Do Your Part* initiative provides simple, everyday solutions for all of us to contribute to the strength of the military family. No effort is too small. Ask your child’s school if they’re part of the Military

Interstate Children’s Compact. Encourage your employer to adopt policies that make jobs portable and flexible for spouses who move often. Get to know the new family on your street. Invite them to coffee. Welcome them to the soccer team or book club.

Military spouses don’t wear the uniform, but their service is constant. This November, during National Military Family Month and as we honor our Veterans, let’s also honor the families who serve beside them — not with words, but with action. Because when military families feel at home, our country is stronger. **RF**

Kathy Roth-Douquet is founder and CEO of Blue Star Families, one of the nation’s largest nonprofits supporting military families. She is also a military spouse of 24 years, four deployments, and nine moves.

According to the 2024 Blue Star Families Military Family Lifestyle Survey, 77 percent of active-duty families say having two incomes is vital to their financial well-being, up sharply from 63 percent in 2019.

Top Reasons Active-Duty Spouses are Searching for Employment Unemployed active-duty spouse respondents*

My family needs the income	51%
Working provides me with a sense of purpose outside of my role within my family	23%
I want to begin or continue a dedicated career path	9%
I want to use my education/skill set	8%
Other	6%
Working provides me with an opportunity to engage with other adults	4%

Question text: What is the top reason you are searching for employment? Select one.

*“Unemployed” is defined as not currently employed and having actively sought work in the last four weeks.

^a Unless otherwise noted, active-duty spouse respondents in this finding refers to those who indicated that they were not also an active-duty service member.

^b Military spouse employment is also the fourth most commonly reported issue of concern for active-duty service member respondents (34%)

Source: Blue Star Families 2024 Military Family Lifestyle Survey

Empowering Military Families, Enriching Local Neighborhoods

Stronger Communities, Stronger Service:
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nationwide to support veteran organizations.

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50,000+

hours volunteered by
our team members with
Operation Gratitude —
helping send care packages
to service members who
can't be home for the
holidays.

650

"Restock Your Pantry"
Kits Packed in San
Diego at Blue Star
Families Welcome
Week



At Target, we have a long-standing commitment to supporting our military communities. Our support extends to organizations like Blue Star Families, National Medal of Honor Museum, Operation Gratitude, the United Services Organization and more.

We are a proud member of the Veterans Jobs Mission - pledging to hire more U.S. military veterans. We support our active military and veteran team members with dedicated resources that build connection and support career growth.

Since 2017, Target has extended a 10% Veteran and Military Families discount for Veterans Day and Independence Day. We have over 1 million verified military guests within Target Circle and have helped them save over \$35 million since 2017.



Readiness Starts at Home

by BESA PINCHOTTI

When we talk about readiness, we often think about the newest aircraft, the latest, cutting-edge technology, or the next-generation training platform. We think about lethality and speed. But as any soldier will tell you — their readiness doesn't start when they report for duty. It starts at home, before they ever put on the uniform. The Army is committed to modernizing — but what does that mean for Army families?

For the last five decades, America has relied on its all-volunteer force to keep America safe at home and around the world. As service members have raised their hands to serve, they've told us that they can't stay mission-focused when they're worried about their families. A parent distracted by childcare challenges, unsafe housing, or an overburdened support system is a parent unable to fully focus on the mission. A soldier with an unsupported family isn't mission ready.

The Army — and indeed, our nation — has begun to recognize what families have long known: investments in people and infrastructure are investments in more than just readiness. They're an investment in national defense.

A New Era of Family-Centered Modernization

Across the Army, families are witnessing a growing commitment to upgrading the infrastructure that makes military life possible, including child development centers, housing, health care facilities, and community programs. These were long-viewed as “nice-to-have” amenities; they're now understood to be the backbone

of a resilient force.

Take Fort Liberty's ongoing housing revitalization initiative, in which targeted investments are transforming outdated and problematic housing into modern, energy-efficient homes that military families want to live in. For decades, military housing has been a hot-button issue for military families —

geographically convenient, but often in need of heavy repairs and renovations. On-base housing, once the center of military life, is now home to only 30 percent of military families; the vast majority live off-base in the community. At Fort Liberty, concerted efforts to renovate the housing that's there and make it desirable for soldiers and families holds the hope of bringing military families back to their community hubs. Historic homes are being upgraded and retrofitted with modern appliances and updated HVAC systems that keep families on base and in community with each other — providing not just better opportunities for on-base housing, but the opportunity for soldiers and their families to share community spaces and neighborhoods with each other.

Then there's the Army's commitment to strengthening its childcare program. From physical design updates that provide dedicated, age-appropriate spaces in Child Development Centers (CDCs) to policies that ensure that CDC employees can enroll their own children at no charge enabling them to actually consistently get to work and keep



Besa Pinchotti

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staffing levels high, the Army is demonstrating its commitment to helping overcome the shortage of high-quality, affordable, and accessible child care all too many soldiers face. The Army understands — a soldier can't get to work and stay focused if they don't know where their kids can be safe while they serve.

In previous generations, childcare was viewed as an individual family problem — and maybe even a problem to be solved by a military spouse. Today's Army is acknowledging that this family issue is also theirs; after all, there's no one more important to the soldier than their family.

Military spouses and service members alike need to ensure that the children in their homes are safe, loved, and growing during the workday. Military families, like so many American families, need to be two-income families just to make ends meet. The Army's commitment to strengthening childcare access for families through competitive pay for CDC staff, fully funding the childcare fee assistance program, and eliminating waiting lists is tangible proof for today's military families that the Army is listening and is modernizing to help them thrive.

Modernization is also taking shape through the Army's community resilience program under the broader Ready and Resilient (R2) strategy — a comprehensive initiative to build resilience in soldiers and their families. NMFA has been working directly with families through our Operation Purple program for over 20 years. In our two-plus decades of work directly with military kids and their parents, we've learned one thing for sure: resilience isn't automatic. It's something military families can learn when the stakes are highest and they have no choice but to learn the hard way, or it can be a skill families are able to cultivate intentionally.

Modernizing Quality of Life for Soldiers and Families

The Army's commitments to modernizing its force by strengthening its families are decades in the making, and the Service's actions are supported by the recommendations of the House Armed Services Committee's Quality of Life Panel for the *Fiscal Year 2025 National Defense Authorization Act*. The panel's recommendations focused on five key areas: pay and compensation, childcare, spouse employment, healthcare, and housing. At the heart of all of them

was the recognition that when service members aren't able to provide a good life for their family, they aren't able to give their all to the military, either.

While the highlight of the committee's work was reflected in a much-needed pay raise for junior enlisted families, many of the other proposals were solutions NMFA has championed for years and the Army is already implementing, including fully funding the Child Care Fee Assistance program, and ensuring competitive pay for CDC staff.

Even as we celebrate progress, we must remain clear-eyed about the gaps. Infrastructure modernization can't be a one-time investment — it must be a sustained commitment.

Families Are a Strategic Asset

The Army's modernization strategy rightly focuses on the future fight on emerging threats and new capabilities to match them. But the biggest risk the Army faces isn't in failing to adequately plan for those threats — it's in letting its commitment to modernize quality of life for military families become a sidebar in the greater modernization conversation.

Every dollar spent improving a CDC, renovating housing, or upgrading a community program pays dividends in retention, morale, and mission readiness. It tells a family deciding whether to stay in uniform that their service — and their sacrifice — matters. It tells the military kids growing up in their home — already more than half of whom tell us they plan to serve — that the bright futures they envision can happen in the Army.

The most important asset the Army has is its soldier — and the most important thing to that soldier is their family. By ensuring that family programs and quality of life issues don't get forgotten in the service's commitment to modernization, the Army stands at the forefront of the military modernization movement and home to the strongest, most mission-focused future force. **RF**

Besa Pinchotti is Chief Executive Officer of the National Military Family Association (NMFA), which works with families to identify and solve the unique challenges of military life. Besa was drawn to NMFA's mission to support the families who serve alongside those in uniform and has held leadership positions at the Association since 2013.

Family, Community, and the Legacy of Military Service in America

by WILL THIBEAU

Service in the United States military is a family affair. The United States Army's own statistics reveal that over 80 percent of Army recruits come from a family with a mother, father, sibling, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or cousin who served in the military as well. As striking, the same data reveals over 25 percent of Soldiers have a mother or father who served in the military. This reveals a de facto warrior caste in American society that cuts against the wishful considerations of our military as a formation of citizen Soldiers imbued with typical social and political ideals. In reality, the military is born of a professional class of Americans who live, work, and raise families in rarified air compared to civilian Americans.

Before understanding the social and policy implications of this demographic stratification, it is key to realize this caste-like characterization of the military's ranks is here to stay. The permanent DEI military bureaucracy displayed the consequences of the forced conversion of the recruiting ranks from legacy servicemembers to first generation recruits from 2018-2024. During that time, the military sought to expand recruiting efforts to population subgroups not typically subject to military recruitment. Military establishment and Democrats made clear this was about breaking the trend of generational service, while also, conveniently, ensuring fewer white Americans joined the ranks.

On one hand, efforts to break generational trends of recruiting succeeded; quotas that dictated the recruitment of fewer white Americans took effect, and the share of white recruits reached the lowest level on record. Problematically, however, more diverse populations without generational

trends of service did not join to make up for the decline in white recruits. This presents a stark reality for military recruitment efforts, and for the nature of the generational lock-in of the American military caste. Generational trends of service is a fact of the system Americans, especially policymakers, should embrace, and subsequently craft policy to make generational trends of service feasible and

beneficial for these families who bear a disproportionate burden for military action on behalf of the American people.

The unique pressures of generational service are best understood as a compounding cycle. Families who send multiple members into uniform often encounter cumulative effects: not only deployments and relocations but repeated disruptions to careers, schooling, and healthcare access. A RAND study on military family readiness notes that frequent moves and operational tempo disproportionately strain families with multiple service connections, who experience "stacked stressors" over time. For these households, the absence of robust family-wide support mechanisms means trauma is rarely confined to a single generation. Instead, unresolved challenges such as mental health conditions, strained marriages, and

economic instability can ripple forward and shape how children view their own potential service.

Recent research underscores how family ties and economic opportunity reinforce these patterns. A *Quarterly Journal of Economics* study found that when one brother enlists, the probability that his sibling also joins rises significantly, not only because of shared identity but also because military service functions as a reliable pathway



Will Thibeu

Over 80 percent of Army recruits come from a family with a mother, father, sibling, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or cousin who served in the military, as well.

to upward economic mobility. The military offers wages, benefits, and educational support that attract families who view enlistment as one of the few stable ladders into the middle class. This dynamic ensures that service replicates itself across households, strengthening the notion that the military operates less as a broad civic institution and more as a self-perpetuating system within certain American families.

At the same time, demographic trends suggest that multigenerational service is becoming more concentrated within certain regions and communities. Studies highlight that southern and rural states now produce the majority of recruits, reinforcing both geographic and familial clustering of military identity. This means that military lineage is not distributed evenly across American society but rather entrenched in pockets where service is both a cultural expectation and an economic pathway. Within those pockets, the likelihood that a child follows a parent into uniform is magnified, further narrowing the base of national defense participation.

It is clear which Americans carry the burden of military service: white men from rural and suburban communities. Political and cultural elites have spent the last two decades belittling and caricaturing them. They mock these men as clingers to guns and religion. They condemn them as the inheritors of slavery. They present them as symbols of privilege rather than as examples of sacrifice and honor. Yet these men remain the backbone of the military. They continue to fight, bleed, and die for a nation that increasingly dismisses their worth. America disgraces itself when it

denigrates the very men who answer the call while others stand aside.

To be clear: every American who volunteers for military service – regardless of identity – makes an equal and profound commitment to the nation. The contributions of all Americans, regardless of their origin story or family tradition of service, deserve the gratitude of a grateful nation. The issue is not one of comparative worth, but of policy clarity and effectiveness considering the relationship between demographics and the political ideologies that too often govern American politics and culture.

If the country intends to honor families of generational service, it must restore dignity to the conditions that shape such men and women. The nation must treat American heritage as a badge of honor, not an object of scorn. Leaders must affirm the people, the land, and the traditions of America

as real sources of strength, not reduce them to abstract ideas. Communities that nurture loyalty, faith, and sacrifice give the military its resilience and character. Policymakers must embrace these communities and elevate them. Only then can the nation preserve the tradition of service and ensure that future generations rise to defend it. **RF**

Will Thibeaup is the Director of the American Military Project at the Claremont Institute, a Visiting Fellow at the Center for Renewing America, a Policy Advisor, and veteran of the Army's 75th Ranger Regiment. While constantly devising plans to return home to Chicago, Will lives in Northern Virginia with his wife and children.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Where do you stand?

What issues are important to you?

Do you agree or disagree with something
you have read in *The Ripon Forum*?

We welcome your thoughts and opinions.

Please write our editor at
editor@riponsociety.org.





DEFENSE

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Ripon Profile

Name & Occupation: Pat Harrigan,
Representative for North Carolina's
10th Congressional District

Previous Positions held: Infantry Platoon Leader,
1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry
Division, Deployed to Afghanistan during Operation
Enduring Freedom (2011–2012); Special Forces
Officer, 3rd Special Forces Group, Commanded a
Special Forces Operational Detachment – Alpha
(ODA), Completed a second deployment to
Afghanistan; Captain, U.S. Army, Graduate of Ranger
School, Awarded two Bronze Star Medals

**How has your service in uniform shaped your
service in Congress?** When you serve on the front lines
for America, you learn very quickly what's important
and what's not. My time as a Green Beret and a student of
history at West Point gave me a simple truth: when America
fails to lead, the world burns. I saw that play out—from
Afghanistan to Iraq to Putin's aggression—and I watched
weak leadership invite chaos.

My charter here is to make sure we don't fight wars we shouldn't
fight, but that when we must, we set the conditions to win. Service
in uniform taught me that weakness guarantees conflict, and strength
deters it. Now, my job in Congress is to take those hard lessons and
make sure America is strong enough to lead, strong enough to keep the
peace, and strong enough to win if we are ever forced to fight.

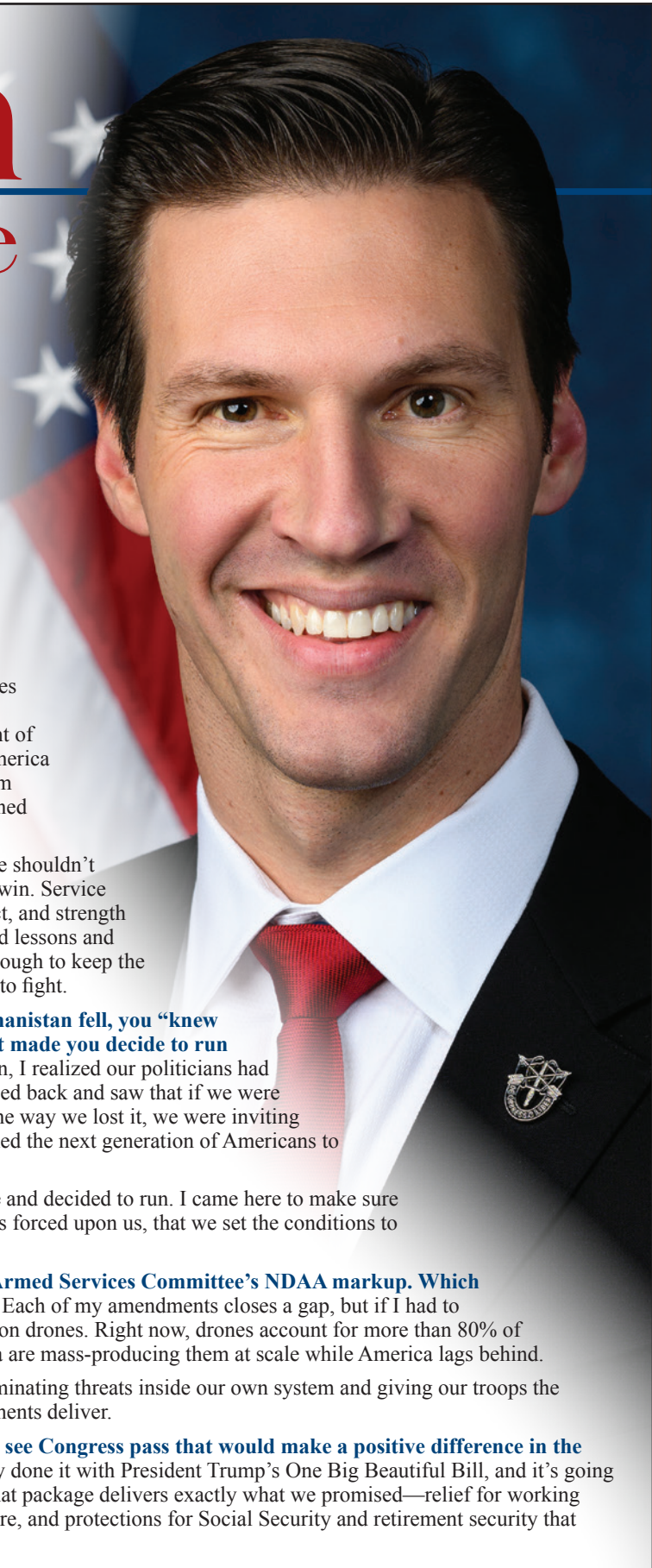
**Your congressional biography states that after Afghanistan fell, you “knew
you had to act.” What was the specific moment that made you decide to run
for Congress?** When Afghanistan came crashing down, I realized our politicians had
failed us and our military leaders had failed us. I stepped back and saw that if we were
structurally so weak that we would lose Afghanistan the way we lost it, we were inviting
our adversaries to attack us. The way we left condemned the next generation of Americans to
conflict, and I couldn't sit by and let us lose.

That was the moment I put my dislike of politics aside and decided to run. I came here to make sure
we don't fight wars we shouldn't fight, but if conflict is forced upon us, that we set the conditions to
win.

**17 of 18 of your amendments were adopted in the Armed Services Committee's NDAA markup. Which
will have the biggest impact on military readiness?** Each of my amendments closes a gap, but if I had to
point to the most impactful, it's the work we're doing on drones. Right now, drones account for more than 80% of
battlefield casualties worldwide, and China and Russia are mass-producing them at scale while America lags behind.

Readiness isn't just about new weapons, it's about eliminating threats inside our own system and giving our troops the
tools to fight and win. That's exactly what my amendments deliver.

**Finally, what one bill or initiative would you like to see Congress pass that would make a positive difference in the
lives of your constituents back home?** We've already done it with President Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill, and it's going
to have a massive impact on the people I represent. That package delivers exactly what we promised—relief for working
families, tax cuts that let small businesses grow and hire, and protections for Social Security and retirement security that
North Carolinians count on.



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