

Opinion | Veterans aren't campaign props — Congress must start acting like it

By Barry Jesinoski

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The U.S. Capitol in Washington, Feb. 10, 2026. (Al Drago/Bloomberg via Getty Images)

Politicians love to parade veterans around during their campaigns. They treat us as props in television ads, backdrops for speeches and convenient proof points for patriotism. They shake our hands, thank us for our service and swear they “have our backs.”

Then they get elected.

Ad

Standing next to a veteran for a photo or soundbite costs nothing. It requires no courage, no compromise and no work. It fits effortlessly into campaign messaging, where symbolism is rewarded and accountability is absent. But governing is where promises are supposed to turn into policy.

Recent Congresses [rank among the least productive](#) in modern history, paralyzed by dysfunction, partisan infighting and an apparent inability to do the basic job voters sent them to Washington to do. Veterans pay the price for that inaction. When Congress stalls, veterans wait longer for care, benefits and justice they have already earned.

Take the [Major Richard Star Act](#), for example. This DAV-supported bipartisan legislation would fix a long-standing injustice that strips combat-injured veterans of the full benefits they earned through sacrifice. It has broad support on both sides of the aisle and has been championed for years. And yet Congress still hasn't finished the job. Veterans are told to wait — again — while lawmakers find time for partisan theater.

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Even worse, Congress routinely hides behind budget tricks like PAYGO, short for “pay as you go,” a rule that requires Congress to offset new federal spending with cuts or revenue elsewhere. This self-imposed, arcane get-out-of-jail-free-card is a convenient excuse to delay or deny veteran legislation. It’s waived for other priorities, but when it comes time to do right by veterans, suddenly the rules are ironclad. That’s not fiscal responsibility — it’s moral cowardice.

We hear endless speeches praising our service. But respect without action is meaningless. Veterans’ issues are complex, but every member of Congress asked for this job. Each of them raised their hand knowing it would be tough. Difficulty is not an excuse for failure.

Veterans are often reluctant to demand more. We’re trained to endure, adapt and push forward without complaint. Too many politicians exploit that, assuming we’ll accept delays, half-measures and excuses.

Veterans deserve better than applause lines and empty promises. And that’s why DAV remains so committed to ensuring these promises are kept. Our mission is to advocate — loudly and relentlessly, just as we are this week during the 2026 DAV Mid-Winter Conference in Washington — for veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors.

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And we will continue to remind Congress of this simple truth: Honoring service isn't a campaign moment. It's a responsibility measured by laws passed, promises kept and lives improved, not by how many veterans appear in a campaign ad.

Barry Jesinoski is the national adjutant and CEO of Disabled American Veterans (DAV).

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