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From a Social Deficit to a Social Asset Model

How Congress and the VA Can Empower Veterans and
Reverse the “Broken Veteran” Narrative

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Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakus, and distinguished members of this subcommittee: Thank you for the opportunity to appear here today, as you consider how to leverage the tremendous power of Congress and the United States toward uplifting our veterans in their transition from war to work and successful civilian lives. It is an honor.

Caring for military veterans' well-being has been the genuine concern of the American public, lawmakers, and veterans' advocates following every armed conflict in which the US has engaged. Recognizing how the nation ought to deliver that care has simultaneously been its most consistent challenge.

America's veterans face three significant challenges in their post-service transition: procuring employment, accessing the education or training associated with particular civilian occupations, and overcoming the "broken veteran" narrative.

Veterans' transition stress is often mistaken and mischaracterized as a grave mental health disorder, feeding the "broken veteran" narrative. Legislation geared only toward veteran suicide unconsciously perpetuates this image. Reformulating veteran legislation in the positive language of economic opportunity, however, emphasizes post-service growth. Congress can instigate this through creating a Veterans Economic Opportunity Administration, which would benefit veterans, the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), Congress, military recruitment efforts, and all of society.

A Public Trust, Challenged

I would like to share two quotes with you, separated by nearly a century, one from a US president and one from a Veterans Board of Appeals lawyer. They express two distinctive but accurate sentiments about America's enduring attitude toward veterans and the system of laws that shape how America actually cares for veterans through the VA and other related agencies.

In 1918, in a Christmas letter to soldiers at Walter Reed hospital, President Woodrow Wilson echoed a long line of American sentiment, stretching back to Abraham Lincoln's words in his Second Inaugural (which later became the VA's motto) to "care for him who shall have born the battle, and for his widow and his orphan." Wilson intoned: "The nation has no more solemn obligation than healing the hurts of our wounded."¹ Americans are conscientious—some may say even sentimental—about the nation's duty and obligation to care for veterans.

Almost as a corrective to that soaring rhetoric, in 2011, scholar James Ridgeway observed in the *Veterans Law Review*: "It should not be assumed that historical artifacts of veterans' law—no matter how entrenched—exist to benefit veterans. Rather every piece must be examined in a historical context."²

There are no two better quotes to illustrate how the American public in general, and its elected politicians in particular, genuinely feel about veterans—but also how and why that care seems so often to fall short of the noble ideal in practice.

At the American Enterprise Institute here in DC, I work with the Program on American Citizenship, which is focused on the fundamental principles and challenges of a free society. We believe, in the words of Walter Berns, one of our late, great scholars of the Constitution (and a veteran), that, among other things:

Citizenship is an awareness of sharing an identity with others . . . a sense of belonging to a community for which one bears some responsibility. In a word, citizenship implies public-spiritedness, which is akin to patriotism, and has to be cultivated.³

Understanding how public sentiment and public policies can go hand in hand but so often be at loggerheads is something we investigate deeply. We look at both the formal and informal institutions of government, as well as how individuals are educated about them and how they understand them, to grasp the dynamics of our cultural and public policy challenges and to present solutions with “teeth in them” that truly improve the lives of flesh-and-blood human beings.

We research civic education and the status of that in our schools, but we also research civil society; the professions and civil society—such as the medical, law, military, and musical professions—and how they strengthen democracy; what they contribute to the virtues of a free society whose disparate parts must still communicate with each other; the civil-military divide; and, thus importantly, veterans and society. This multidisciplinary approach gives us a wealth of insight into the challenges of maintaining a professional all-volunteer force in a diverse society, which increasingly has no connection to even the idea of military service (because of the lack of K–12 civic education and a geographically sparse ROTC presence), let alone know a current or former member of the Armed Services.

A Damaging Veteran Narrative in Need of Reversal

What we see is well-known—but only in part—to this audience: After 40 years of the all-volunteer force, and despite nearly two decades of war post-9/11, the American public respects the military and those who serve *in the aggregate*, but they do not know anything about them. They call veterans “heroes” but believe they are “broken.”⁴ Even the best-intentioned employers and educators labor under the false impression that veterans are not experienced and educated candidates, that veterans do not pursue a college degree or vocational training, or that veterans do not have successful careers after the military.⁵

Additionally, the American public erroneously believes that the overwhelming majority of veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other severe mental health conditions because of their military experience and that veterans therefore may *never* be able to take their place as healthy, happy, contributing members of society. A majority of the public—71 percent—acknowledge that civilians do not understand the problems faced by those in the military or by their families; 84 percent of post-9/11 veterans agree. The cultural narrative about veterans, compounded by Hollywood and the media, is so strong that even veterans describe their transition stresses as mental health disorders, for lack of any other narrative about the difficulties inherent in returning to the civilian sphere.⁶

And yet, we have extensive, empirical documentation that “PTSD typically occurs in only a relatively small population of returning veterans” and that the range of PTSD prevalence in Operating Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom veterans is actually between 4.7 and 19.9 percent.⁷

The general instinct that contemporary war veterans are a population that requires services to function in civil society, rather than a population that has any valuable

services to offer back, is particularly damaging to veterans themselves, as I have written about in the attached report, “Economic Opportunity, Transition Assistance, and the 21st-Century Veteran: The Case for a Fourth VA Administration.” Psychologically, this is bound up in questions of identity, described by researchers as social identity theory and involving concepts of identity fusion, contingent self-worth, and “stereotype threat,” but complicated by the modern phenomenon of a delayed “emerging adulthood.”⁸ Socially and culturally, this public instinct damages veterans in how it shapes public policy and the organs of government that deliver policy to veterans—the VA—by reemphasizing (however well-intentioned) the supposed brokenness of all veterans.

While not all who have served in uniform qualify for health or other benefits from the VA, the millions who do qualify drive the public narrative about veterans because the VA is the nation’s most prominent recognition of military service. Additionally, the highly visible and historic Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) place the VA at the center of the veteran–federal government relationship. The VA-VSO-veteran dynamic translates to the public assuming that the VA serves any veteran and that each veteran is equally in need of those services. Over time, this has adversely constructed a veteran-as-deficit model, visible in how the federal government treats veterans through the instrument of the VA and how legislators craft veterans legislation in light of advocacy demands and agency dynamics.

A note about these dynamics: The VA has expanded haphazardly due to political pressures for more than a century, to deliver financial benefits or pensions to veterans, calculated from the premise that the injured veteran will never enter the economy again. Despite broad innovations that have shifted the economy from its 1917 Industrial Age model to its current information age model, the VA continues to think in Industrial Age terms about especially injured and disabled veterans.

As society enlarges its definition of disability in pace with medical discoveries and politically advantageous welfare programs, the VA has grown to be the second-largest federal agency, while the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) now makes its largest financial outlays. Between 2008 and 2016, VBA compensation outlays increased by 114 percent—according to the VA itself, because post-9/11 veterans have a tendency to apply for their benefits and care before they transition out of the military, in addition to their being awarded higher percentages of disability compensation than previous cohorts of war veterans.⁹

This increase of high disability awardees could be entirely warranted. But the current disability schedule is also problematic, as it appears to be acting as a disincentive to veterans to enter the workforce and engage with society. The level of veterans’ sense of isolation from society, not to mention rates of suicide, are unacceptable outcomes for this policy model.

These outcomes point to the fact that, for all its \$200 billion dollar budget, the VA does not track its programs’ outcomes. At the very least, it haphazardly documents outputs. It has hamstrung its own ability to serve veterans by not measuring its programs. As the slate of recent congressional hearings over VA programs and failed or “delayed” implementations illustrates, this undermines public confidence in the VA. When the VA has bungled and delayed payments for one program alone, the GI Bill, five times in only 10 years—2009, 2013, 2014, 2017, and 2018—it directly hurts veterans and contributes to young men and women deciding against joining the military and against being under the VA’s care in the future.

This is a terribly worrisome cycle. Fortunately, it has also created the historic opportunity present before us, to harness the power of congressional legislation to reshape the veteran narrative. By rethinking the tremendous ability the VA has to be an active partner with Congress, and understanding veterans as investments that can be leveraged toward greater individual growth with positive societal impact, the proposed Veterans' Education, Transition, and Opportunity Prioritization Plan Act of 2019 (VET OPP Act) can champion the veteran-as-asset model. It recognizes that having a fourth high-level, prominent institutional VA mechanism—a Veterans' Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration, headed by its own under secretary—can light the pathway to success for post-service veterans, similarly to how Department of Defense mechanisms involving training, a sense of purpose, and a shared community shape young civilians into successful soldiers.

Identity, Education, and Employment: Pathway to Veteran Success

Currently, approximately half (50.3 percent) of active-duty enlisted personnel are 25 years old or younger. Of the entire military force, somewhat fewer (43.8 percent) are in that age bracket.¹⁰ Developmentally speaking, this is the “emerging adulthood” period—a period of rapid development involving key struggles surrounding personal identity. The military offers concrete answers to common existential questions, reinforcing them through experience, during this normative period.

The positive self-regard cultivated during military service becomes a focal point of the psychological changes that often distinguish the period of transition out of the military. Research from Columbia University reveals that veterans experience grief-like symptoms at the loss of their previous military identity, which in turn augments all the stressors of a life transition, when facing the initial instability of civilian life and lacking the order and purpose that characterized their service.¹¹

The media and the public overwhelmingly call this experience of veteran transition stress PTSD and erroneously believe that the majority of all post-9/11 veterans have a mental health disorder. Unfortunately, since funded research at the VA's military treatment facilities prioritizes PTSD research, and since the preponderance of well-intentioned veteran legislation post-9/11 emphasizes mental health disorders, the public, potential employers, and veterans themselves are trapped in the inaccurate and harmful “broken veteran” narrative cycle.

As previously mentioned, currently, over half of employers believe that veterans do not have successful careers after leaving the military. Half do not think that veterans pursue a college or vocational school degree, but 62 percent believe veterans need to acquire more hard and soft skills before they are ready for nonmilitary roles.¹²

Veterans themselves tend to agree that they need “soft,” or communication, skills. Both veterans and employers nearly unanimously agree on the benefit of internship or apprenticeship programs for veterans as they seek to reenter the civilian workforce. And post-9/11 veterans especially see education as crucial to their continued success.

The VA has a suite of educational assistance, vocational rehabilitation and employment, and education and career counseling programs, as well as broadly defined shared transition assistance programs (with the Departments of Labor, Defense, and Homeland Security), which make accessible all the tools veterans need to progress from war to work. But these are at the bottom of the program pyramid within the VBA.

The VA's nearly century-old structural design impedes its own ability to help veterans achieve that success. Its outdated manufacturing-economy outlook, which informs the VBA's 1917-based disability model, sees a service-connected condition only through the terms of a permanent earnings loss and works as a perverse incentive against veterans entering the workforce. With all the VBA's energies directed toward its backlog of hundreds of thousands of disability claims, its institutional resources are concentrated on the disability system to the unsurprising neglect of its education and economic programs. This is one systemic reason why we consistently see the VA's failure to implement the GI Bill, no matter who the VA secretary is at the time or who sits in the White House.

One other small but illustrative example: If you visit the VA's Office of Employment and Economic Impact website, within the VBA, it tells you that "it is no longer available" and to maybe check out the Department of Labor.

Coincidentally, a majority of veterans report that navigating the VA's administrations and benefits is their top challenge in transition to civilian life.¹³ The very VA economic opportunity programs veterans stand most to profit by are operating with the proverbial millstone around their necks.

Conclusion

In the 21st-century information age, education is key to employment, and employment is the door to a successful transition to civilian life. Education and employment combined give veterans the crucial tools to reforge civilian identities stronger even than their military ones. The psychic rewards of work, productivity, and a career cannot be underestimated, which is corroborated by the true veteran narrative: Veterans, it turns out, are immensely successful. Empirical data shore that up by showing how veterans with increased levels of education are wealthier, healthier, and more civically engaged than even their civilian peers over the life course. Additional research establishes the links between these outcomes and reduced rates of dependence, disability, and criminality.¹⁴

This is the veteran narrative that should predominate. The goal of the nation's veteran economic opportunity programs should be to enable soldiers to be fully functional members of society, animated by a strong civilian identity. As early as the Revolutionary War, Gen. George Washington had felt intuitively that veterans needed to maintain a sense of self after military service, recommending in his Farewell Orders to the Armies of the United States that veterans funnel their energies as soon as possible into active pursuits and "prove themselves not less virtuous and useful as Citizens, than they [were] persevering and victorious as soldiers."¹⁵

The VET OPP Act can trigger this shift, as Congress elevates and frees already existing VA economic opportunity and transition assistance programs through shifting them structurally into a fourth VA administration. The VA's education and employment programs are truly different in kind from the other operations the VBA manages. Separating out the management of the VA's economic opportunity programs not only honors that difference but also creates greater accountability, attention, and leadership over what should be publicly acknowledged as the VA's most important instrument in partnering with veterans in their civilian success.

Veterans are the unacknowledged permanent ambassadors of national service. How we publicly portray veterans directly relates to how society conceptualizes military service,

including what happens to an individual during that service. In an all-volunteer force, reputation is key to the attractiveness of joining a profession that can end in death or permanent disability. Those who choose to wear the nation's uniform, as well as those who choose not to, are influenced by how well Congress and the VA care for veterans' post-service reputations and for their physical bodies.

Our nation ought to provide transitioning service members with the means and opportunity to succeed in their civilian lives and to invest their talent and ability in the American economy.

Empowering VA itself to invest in veterans, through creating a fourth administration for economic opportunity and transition assistance, directly benefit every veteran, present and future.

Thank you again for the honor of this opportunity. I look forward to answering any questions from the committee.

Notes

¹ "President Wilson's Message on Healing the Hurts of Our Wounded," Come-Back, December 24, 1918, as recounted in Jessica L. Adler, *Burdens of War: Creating the United States Veterans Health System* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 77.

² James D. Ridgway, "The Splendid Isolation Revisited: Lessons from the History of Veterans' Benefits Before Judicial Review," *Veterans Law Review* 3 (2011): 145.

³ Walter Berns, *Making Patriots* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), II.

⁴ Rebecca Burgess, "Beyond the 'Broken Veteran': A History of America's Relationship with its Ex-Soldiers," War on the Rocks, March 7, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/beyond-the-broken-veteran-a-history-of-americas-relationship-with-its-ex-soldiers/>.

⁵ See, for example, Natalie Gross, "Study: Companies Still Don't Understand Veterans," Military Times RebootCamp, July 26, 2018, <https://rebootcamp.militarytimes.com/news/employment/2018/07/26/study-companies-still-dont-understand-veterans/>

⁶ Meaghan C. Mobbs and George A. Bonanno, "Beyond War and PTSD: The Crucial Role of Transition Stress in the Lives of Military Veterans," *Clinical Psychology Review* 59 (2018): 137–44.

⁷ Mobbs and Bonanno, "Beyond War and PTSD."

⁸ See Mobbs and Bonanno, "Beyond War and PTSD." See also Claude M. Steele, "A Threat in the Air: How Stereotypes Shape Intellectual Identity and Performance," *American Psychologist* 52 (1997): 613–29; Dan Pronk, "Abandoning the Tribe: The Psychology Behind Why Veterans Struggle to Transition to Civilian Life," NewsRep, January 10, 2019,

<https://thenewsrep.com/112569/abandoning-the-tribe/>; and Dan Pronk, "Filling the Void: Maslow and Transitioning out of the Military," NewsRep, January 11, 2019,

<https://thenewsrep.com/112572/filling-the-void-maslow-and-transitioning-out-of-the-military/>.

⁹ US Department of Veterans Affairs, *Department of Veterans Affairs: FY 2018–2024 Strategic Plan*, February 12, 2018, <https://www.va.gov/oei/docs/va2018-2024strategicplan.pdf>.

¹⁰ US Department of Defense, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, *2015 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community*, 2015, <http://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2015-Demographics-Report.pdf>.

¹¹ Mobbs and Bonanno, "Beyond War and PTSD."

¹² Edelman Insights, "2017 Veterans' Well-Being Survey: Focus on Employment, Education, and Health," October 27, 2017, <https://www.slideshare.net/EdelmanInsights/2017-veterans-wellbeing-survey>.

¹³ Corri Zoli, Rosalinda Maury, and Daniel Fay, *Missing Perspectives: Servicemembers' Transition from Service to Civilian Life*, Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University, November 2015.

¹⁴ Zoli, Maury, and Fay, *Missing Perspectives*.

¹⁵ George Washington, "George Washington to Continental Army, Farewell Orders," November 2, 1783, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mgw3b.016/?sp=338&st=text>.