

This Memorial Day, supporting veterans is a matter of national security

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This Memorial Day the discussion will undoubtedly be framed around the debt owed to those who have served, and the moral obligation of a grateful nation to repay that debt. It's a debt both real and owed. However, to suggest that efforts to support our veterans with meaningful jobs and education are based solely on repaying a debt is both limiting and dangerous. Instead, it's critical for policymakers, politicians, and most important, the American public to understand that the support and care of wounded warriors, veterans, and military families is also a national security imperative if the United States is to maintain an effective all-volunteer force.

The all-volunteer military was first proposed by Adlai Stevenson during his campaign for president in 1956. But it took the anti-war sentiment of the post-Vietnam era to make the concept a reality. The architects of the volunteer force had great concerns about its sustainability — chief among them was attracting and retaining exceptional volunteers. A central element of the blueprint was to position military service as a road to educational and career opportunities — in the military and afterward — that might otherwise be out of reach for many Americans.

Consider some of these military recruiting slogans: “Stand Up, Stand Out,” “Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines! What a great place — it's a great place to start!” and “Get an Edge on Life.” The suggestion that the military offers a “leg up” continues to define military recruiting campaigns today.

But what happens when the next generation of potential soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines sees this generation of veterans struggling to find jobs, and struggling in other ways? What happens when future generations dismiss the suggestion that military service confers “an edge on life”? When that day comes, the fears of those who laid the blueprint for America's experiment with an all-volunteer force become realized. When that happens, we are all less safe, and that truth is embedded in the doctrine that informs our national defense.

The National Security Strategy, which emphasizes all of the nation's resources as an element of security, says that rededicating “ourselves to providing support and care of wounded warriors, veterans, and military families” is fundamental to America's defense posture. The National Military Strategy adds that America's leaders “are the strongest advocate” for the nation's commitment to caring for our wounded veterans and their families.

Thankfully, key government leaders understand this. To emphasize the relationship between veteran welfare and national security, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki hold regular “summit” meetings focused on recovery coordination for the wounded, ill, and injured; the disability evaluation system; and transition programs. Congress also gets it. Veterans programs have been protected from budget cuts, largely because they are recognized as a national security concern. The Budget Control Act of last August included Veterans Affairs in the “security” category, along with the department of Defense, the intelligence community, Homeland Security, and portions of the State Department budget. The White House this year requested extra funding for the disability evaluation system, as well as family support and veterans' transition programs.

It should not be a surprise that our nation's most senior leaders recognize that the welfare of our veterans represents a key component of our defense posture, because it's not a new idea. In fact, George Washington, our nation's first president, made this point very plainly when he said, “the willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation.”

Many of us came of age under the watchful guidance of the “greatest generation,” a generation of veterans supported by citizens and communities that intimately understood the role that those veterans had played in our national defense. That same understanding doesn't exist today. A 2011 study from the Pew Research Center shows the public's great distance from 10 years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq: Only a quarter of adults surveyed say they are following news of the wars closely; only 43 percent believe that Americans have had to make a lot of sacrifices since the 9/11 attacks; and half say the wars have made little difference in their lives. This is the crux of the challenge we face today.

Public discourse related to the support of our veterans and military families must be broadened to include how and why supporting our returning veterans with jobs, healthcare, education, and community is a duty and responsibility that goes far beyond repaying a debt. It's about keeping us safe, and paying forward on an obligation to future generations of Americans.

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