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On September 11th 2001, I was assigned as an instructor at the U.S. Air Force Academy. Just minutes before the start of my first class of the day, a plane impacted the World Trade Center. I rushed to my classroom and found 40 scared and confused cadets. We sat together in silence, watching as a second plane hit the second tower. One cadet broke the quiet. "Captain Haynie," she said, "This is going to change everything, isn't it?" I responded, "For all of you...forever."

There's no question that the events of 9/11 impacted every American in some way, but a small minority has shouldered the burden of a decade at war. Less than one half of one percent of Americans has volunteered for military service over the past 10 years. The president's announcement that U.S. forces will leave Iraq by years end symbolically closes the chapter on that war. However, the final chapter in this country's 40-year experiment with an all-volunteer military has yet to be written.

The foundational assumption that sustains an all-volunteer force is an implicit quid-pro-quo relationship between those who don't volunteer, and those we send to war on behalf of all Americans. Recently the Pew Research Group released a report that acknowledges much quid from those who have worn the uniform, but far less meaningful pro-quo from those who have not.

According to the study, more than half of those surveyed reported that 10 years of war has had no real impact on their daily lives. Further, while 83 percent of that group acknowledged the extraordinary sacrifices of military families since 9/11, barely three in ten believes that a disparity in sacrifice is unfair. Instead, it's just "part of being in the military."

By itself the report didn't surprise me, but a recent airplane flight helped me see clearly how the lack of empathy and understanding illustrated by the study's findings might spell the end of an all-volunteer military in this country.

Soon after boarding the flight, two uniformed soldiers took seats up front. The pilot acknowledged the soldiers, and the passengers cheered. The woman next to me made particular "show" of her appreciation, so I decided to try and talk to her about the challenges facing this generation of veterans. While she was initially enthusiastic, as we talked I sensed she grew more and more uncomfortable.

How could it be true that 17 veterans take their own lives every day in America? 15% are unemployed? It can't be correct that on any given night more than 150,000 veterans sleep on the street? She looked dumbfounded when I told her that conservatively 30 percent of the 2.5 million post-9/11 veterans will live out their lives with a disability.

I'm quite sure that she honestly didn't believe anything I was saying, and she finally blurted, "This isn't like Vietnam. 9/11 changed that. Didn't you see us all clap for those soldiers?" With that, she was finished with me. She flipped open her iPad, put on her headphones, and spent the rest of the flight watching Home & Garden TV.

I thought maybe I had gone too far, but sitting across the aisle from me was a young man dressed not in a uniform, but in shorts and a t-shirt. He'd been listening to our conversation and he tapped me on the shoulder, leaned close, and said "Thanks." His name was Tim, and he wasn't much older than the two soldiers sitting in front. But he was different, because his days fighting America's battles were over. He was a veteran.

We talked, and I learned that over the past six years he'd been deployed twice to Iraq. Tim also spent a year in Afghanistan. He told me that in the eight months since he left the military, he hasn't slept much. The ringing in his hears keeps him awake. Tim hasn't found a job yet, either. He tried school, but didn't feel like he 'fit in' and dropped out after only three months. Worst of all, Tim said that since he's been home, he's felt anonymous.

Anonymous. That word hit me like a punch in the gut. My mind replayed the scene made by the woman on my right, clapping and cheering for the uniformed soldiers on our plane. How did that scene make this young combat veteran feel? It made him feel anonymous. Worse, when he listened to her demonstrate both ignorance and indifference to the issues he endures on a daily basis as a consequence of his service, how did that make him feel? Anonymous.

The obligation that comes with deferring military service to others is engaged citizenship. The obligation that comes with deferring military service to others is a meaningful and personal investment in the complex, messy issues now facing America's veterans. To be clear, supporting our military, veterans and their families cannot begin and end with yellow ribbons, TV specials, and a few rounds of applause on an airplane. I'm not suggesting that those aren't great and appreciated gestures. I am saying that Tim wants, needs, and deserves more. He wants a job. He needs an education. He deserves –because he's earned – not to feel anonymous among the very citizens for whom he served and sacrificed. If we can't bridge the growing divide between America and our veterans, the community-based approach to reintegrating our veterans into civilian life that Admiral Mullen and others have advocated will fail. And be warned, if we fail this generation of veterans, this nation's experiment with a citizen-soldier, all-volunteer military will likely fail as well. Hopefully that possibility brings pause to overwhelming majority Americans that indicated in the Pew Study that they strongly disapprove of bringing back the draft. Quid-pro-Quo.

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