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Stand on the corner of H Street and Vermont Avenue in Washington, D.C., and in every direction you'll see the ways and means of American government — the White House in front, the Treasury to the left and the huge Office of Management and Budget building down the street and to the right. This vista is both symbolic of — and essential to running — our system of governance “by the people, for the people.”

On that same corner sits the Department of Veterans Affairs. No building in Washington is more emblematic of the sacrifices made by citizens of this nation in service to the ideals of freedom and democracy.

At the entrance to the department is a bronze plaque that reads, “To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan.” These words, spoken by President Abraham Lincoln in his Second Inaugural Address, embody the notion that all Americans are inherently connected to those citizens who “have borne the battle.” In truth, however, America has a somewhat uneven history with regard to upholding this assumed social contract.

As the nation approaches the end of its longest war, in Afghanistan, we suggest a historic (and long overdue) action: crafting and institutionalizing a coordinated, comprehensive, whole-of-the-nation National Veterans Strategy.

What do we mean by a National Veterans Strategy? First, we mean starting a national dialogue to define our societal obligations to those who volunteer for military service. Second, we mean establishing policies to carry out those obligations, engaging government, the private sector, veterans service organizations and local communities to combine resources in support of veterans and their families. In a report released recently by our offices at Syracuse University, the Institute for Veterans and Military Families and the Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism, we recommend several steps the federal government should take toward creating such a strategy. Those include creating an interagency commission to develop the policy, establishing an office to oversee the policy and forming a coalition of private groups willing to collaborate in supporting veterans and their families.

A National Veterans Strategy represents an opportunity not just to improve programs, but also nurture healthier civil-military relations and ensure a strong, sustainable national defense. It's a chance to confer new meaning to President Lincoln's words. But why now?

First, there is a fiscal and public policy argument. More than 1,300 federal and state policies, executive orders and agency directives affect veteran services and benefits. We believe this plethora of policies is complicating meaningful collaboration and reducing efficiency in putting public and private sector resources to their best use in service to veterans. Nearly every federal agency has some responsibility for veterans-related programs, and this disparate policy landscape — though well intentioned — means there is redundancy in programs, ineffective use of resources and insufficient interagency and public-

private coordination.

In 2013, the United States will spend an estimated \$140.3 billion on veterans programs and services through the Department of Veterans Affairs, more than double the level in 2000. Demand for benefits and services will continue to increase, as an additional one million service members leave the military by 2016. In the face of likely fiscal constraints, a National Veterans Strategy could prove an effective means to align policy, coordinate federal, state, local and private-sector efforts and rationalize fiscal choices in a way that limits the potential for veterans' issues to become politicized during partisan budget debates.

There is also a national security argument for creating a National Veterans Strategy. The sustainability of the all-volunteer force depends upon attracting talented, service-minded young people to a military career. Yet consider a Pew research poll indicating that while 9 in 10 Americans hold a favorable perception of the military, fewer than half would recommend military service to a young person. The best way to reinforce positive attitudes toward military service is, we believe, effectively supporting and advancing the well-being of veterans and their families.

Finally, there is an argument grounded in the founding traditions and moral norms of our nation. America's legacy of caring for its veterans dates back to the late 17th century at Plymouth colony, where pensions were provided to military veterans disabled while protecting the colony.

Maintaining a force of volunteers carries with it certain obligations, incurred by citizens and institutions that benefit from the military service of others, an obligation that ensures that military service is treated as something more than simply a vocation. Institutionalizing a National Veterans Strategy is therefore a moral act that will strengthen our nation's ability to satisfy this covenant between the volunteer force and the society they serve.

How, then, would a National Veterans Strategy be organized? What would be its priorities? How would it be implemented? These are all questions that must be addressed through a national dialogue.

Importantly, our call to action is not solely directed at, nor dependent on, government. A National Veterans Strategy is an opportunity for engaged citizenship, and the process should be inclusive and collaborative. Organizations and leaders in the veterans' community should engage public and private sector stakeholders, ideally under the framework of a presidentially directed commission, to discuss and ultimately seek a consensus on a strategy. From there, it would fall to the White House and Congress to turn those recommendations into programs and policies.

President Calvin Coolidge said, “The nation which forgets its defenders will be itself forgotten.” Let future generations say of this generation, “They were the ones who finally got it right.” Let us seize the opportunity to come together and marshal our disparate skills and resources behind an enduring legacy. Let us be the generation of Americans who create an enduring National Veterans Strategy — a strategy to honor, support and empower this next “Greatest Generation” and cement our nation's commitment to future generations of veterans.

Mike Haynie, a former US Air Force officer, is executive director and founder of the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University.