



Military Veterans Seeking Elected Office:

USA TODAY recently featured a cover story entitled “War Vets Ready for New Battle: Politics” that discussed the influx of military veterans seeking federal office in 2006. The Veterans for National Security (VNS) Foundation was founded upon the belief that veterans are oftentimes ideal candidates to continue an established record of selfless service as elected officials after completion of their military duty. The VNS Foundation is not, however, of the belief that service in uniform singularly qualifies an individual for elected office. Just as each soldier, sailor, airman, marine or coast guardsman undergoes extensive basic and advanced training and education before undertaking their military duties and responsibilities so too should equal care and consideration be exercised when considering a bid for elected office.

A number of members of the media and political candidates have shared the misapprehension as of late that uniformed service alone should afford automatic election to federal office. While our democracy has been called “the worst form of government except all of the others,” indeed one of its cornerstones is representative governance. Thus, the 535 men and women who speak for our more than 300 million citizens should, in ideal terms, be uniquely qualified to represent their constituency while possessing a holistic understanding of the issues and challenges facing citizens in their district or state.

Veterans returning from Iraq, Afghanistan, Africa and myriad other outposts in our Global War on Terrorism represent the very best that this nation has to offer, but may not initially have the most well-defined positions on education, health care, taxation, Medicare and Social Security reform, and the like beyond a rote recitation of a particular party line. As such, each veteran considering further public service in elected office may not be best equipped or prepared immediately upon their return from military service. In our foundation’s experience, many of the veterans who have run and lost under similar circumstances in recent years have walked away from politics altogether—to the detriment of those whom they could admirably serve in the future. The VNS Foundation exists to assist these same individuals and others in a comprehensive self-assessment regarding their possible candidacies. Such an honest and open appraisal serves the candidate and their constituency in the long run.

As a truly nonpartisan national entity whose leadership and members run the gamut of political affiliation, beliefs and philosophy, we hold true to our most common bond: that of service and sacrifice for our nation. There is an age old adage that states “you cannot argue with a veteran” meaning that veterans have certainly more than earned the right to enter into dialogue and discourse on any and all issues of the day. Military service does not though, in and of itself, prequalify an individual to serve in Congress or best understand the needs of his or her district; communal views on local, regional or national issues; and the necessary representation thereof.

Since World War II, all but one of our presidents and many of our elected federal officeholders have been military veterans, as our citizenry recognizes their innate leadership, strength of resolve and typical level of character. One would hope that, as both major political parties line up their candidates for the upcoming mid-term elections, unmitigated fervor for political power does not allow an “our veterans versus your veterans” mentality or modus operandi to prevail.

Simply put, when each of us raised our right hand to protect and defend the Constitution of these United States and served our country thereafter, we did not ask the man or woman to our right or left what their party affiliation was. What mattered most then and now was a shared and steadfast commitment to community and country.

It has been said that “no one prays for peace more than the soldier.” It is also true that no one prays for partisanship more than parties in power or seeking the same. We hope that our fellow veterans running for office all fight the good fight and remain above the fray. Whether one or 100 are elected this fall, Congress would gain another first-hand perspective on matters of national defense and security. Regardless of the individual outcomes, each veteran seeking federal office should be commended for answering the call to service in their civilian lives. Our populace is fortunate to have so many men and women willing to provide a lifetime of selfless service to their nation.

Thomas J. Ratcliff
The Veterans for National Security Foundation
Alexandria, Virginia