

Veterans are Uniquely Suited to Fill Political Office

By Rhonda Quillin, Editor, DTAC, CGSS, CGSC

The Profession of Arms exists to defend the Constitution of the United States, and the characteristics and attributes expected of service members to uphold this obligation makes them well suited for further public service. American military veterans are disciplined and accomplished leaders who exemplify high personal values and ethics, often possess an advanced education, and are experienced at solving complex problems.ⁱ No other profession emphasizes leadership, both in education and practice, like the military. These characteristics contribute to uniquely suit veterans for political office.

Veterans have provided honorable service in a profession that values a work ethic, honesty, and teamwork. Attitudes shaped during American military service consist of a strong work ethic; honesty due to a clearly defined value system; and the ability to solve complex problems; e.g., critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, planning skills and crisis management. Experiences shared by veterans that are of unique value for political office include the ability to make important strategic decisions on the use of military force, decisions on resourcing the military based upon roles and capabilities, and foreign affairs knowledge and experience. In addition to these characteristics, further academic education is strongly encouraged and often obtained.ⁱⁱ

As military professionals, duty requires complex problem solving and accountability for one's actions; these attributes contribute to a responsive stewardship toward the military profession that is consistent with the needs of political office and the public's concerns.

Research spanning the last 50+ years on the public's attitude toward congress and the presidency consistently shows that the public's confidence has eroded in their level of trust and confidence in politicians. Some specific negative factors reported were that politicians were viewed as dishonest, unwilling to work together, and irresponsible about resources (natural and public).ⁱⁱⁱ

Americans are still dissatisfied^{iv} with politicians of both parties. This is because of the perception that politicians won't work together, there is a lack of communication amongst them, "no plan" because of partisanship, and a question of personal integrity for many. These concerns have led to the public's confidence in elected officials at the lowest level since the 1960's.

ⁱ Based on Chapter 7 of ADRP 6-22.

ⁱⁱ Based on Chapter 6 of ADRP 1

ⁱⁱⁱ DeSilver, Drew. Pew Research Center. Sept 4, 2013.

^{iv} *National Journal* Heartland Monitor Poll, 2014.

Veterans are Uniquely Suited to Fill Political Office

Rhonda Quillin, US Army Command and General Staff College

The Army profession exists to provide honorable service, and to support and defend the Constitution of the United States in a manner consistent with American values, basic rights, and the Army Ethic. Veterans are uniquely suited to political office because of their expertise in ethical leadership and their value system. There are few, if any, professions that match the military in crafting honorable and responsive public servants with national and global awareness.

By the time an officer or non-commissioned officer is mid-career, competencies include a highly developed leadership style, a national and international awareness, and an ability to form coalitions to work with large diverse groups, both governmental and nongovernmental, to accomplish the bigger goal. Additionally, the Army leader is aware of the importance of integrity, doing the right thing legally and morally, and the necessity of superb communication. They are highly educated, not only in military instruction, but often have completed graduate-level academic education.

The military veterans who adhere to the “servant-leader” paradigm of leadership by focusing on others often look to a “second service” and may find they are unique and well-suited for political office because of their values and ethics, leadership, and stewardship competencies.

The Five Essential Characteristics of the Army Profession, military expertise, honorable service, trust, esprit de corps, and stewardship of the profession, along with Army Values, the profession’s moral foundation and the principles that guide decisions and actions, are attributes that may lead to a successful “second service” in political office.

I. Current Political Environment

“Get it together, everyone”ⁱ is the prevailing response from the American public to the daily breakdowns between political parties and politicians. We are in an era of unprecedented divisiveness in politics and most Americans now believe politicians won’t work together to accomplish even the most basic tasks.ⁱⁱ

The last US Congress had the lowest approval ratings (9 percent) in the history of the United States. Approximately 60 percent of voters saw the House and the Senate as refusing to work together, and even after the election, more than half of Americans said they believe that nothing was fixed and Congress and the president would still not work togetherⁱⁱⁱ.

So, despite the public's lack of support of political officials and this being a concern demonstrated strongly to both parties in the elections, early indications have validated voter's concerns and political conditions are showing little change. The people that currently lead our country, and the laws they make, are supported by the historically smallest percent of the people they serve^{iv}.

The public currently names political office has become one of the least respected jobs in the country. The Harris Poll recently conducted a survey of what is seen as the most and least respected occupations in the US. Of 23 professions listed, military officers placed 2nd, after doctors; while members of Congress were 8th from the bottom of the list, after entertainers^v.

Why is political office and those in office currently not respected? One reason may be the lack of ethics demonstrated by politicians; such as, in the last 5 years (2010 -2015) there have been 75 elected politicians convicted of crimes while serving. This does not include political or personal scandals, accusations, arrests, or indictments. The convictions range from tax evasion, bribery, fraud, shoplifting, assault and battery, grand felony theft, obstruction of justice, and extortion, to a variety of pornography charges.

The number of elected public officials who have been convicted of crimes while in office has been steadily increasing. Polls often reflect 10-year intervals; however, the last 5 years show the largest increase of convictions of public officials ever recorded. Looking back to the 2000-2009 interval, there were 106 criminal convictions of serving officials; this number almost doubled the 54 convictions during 1990-1999 (though it is worth noting that a large part (16) of the 54 convictions were from a single indictment.)^{vi}

“In these ongoing revelations, the media, other politicians, and the general public frequently characterize these leaders as bad people, even calling them evil. Leaders who lose their way are not necessarily bad people; rather, they lose their moral bearings, often yielding to their own disillusion. Very few people go into leadership roles to cheat or do evil, yet we all have the capacity for actions we deeply regret unless we stay grounded.”^{vii}

The general public has little respect for those currently in political office, approval rates are the lowest in history, and believe things won't get better. What has gone wrong with officials in political office and where should voters look for future political leaders?

2. Veterans' Competencies

“No matter what your supporters want, leadership, honesty and successful working & leadership is what constituents want.”^{viii}

Every legitimate profession has a code of ethics, these professions tend to be ones with power and responsibility. Honor and ethics make personal responsibility more obvious and legally binding. Professionals make judgments, apply their skills, reach informed decisions, and act in situations that the general public may not because others have not received the relevant training. Military education includes ethical leadership and codes of conduct, these have a huge impact since they create standards of personal behavior and values.

Veterans have experience working within codes of honor and ethical leadership, “the very exercise of developing a code is in itself worthwhile; it forces a large number of people . . . to think through in a fresh way their mission and the important obligations they as a group and as individuals have with respect to society as a whole.”^{ix}

During World War II, 10% of the total US population served in the armed forces and later, those and Korean War Veterans made up 60-70% of Congress. The post 9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been fought by a historically small volunteer US military, so that only about 1% of the general population participated. According to census figures, veterans now represent 7% of the American population and currently comprise 20% of Congress (19% Senators and 21% Representatives) in a “second service” to America.

Seth Lynn thinks one of the problems with our political system these days is the small percent that are veterans and wants to change that. Seth is a Naval Academy graduate who spent six years in the Marines and helped found VETERANS CAMPAIGN, a political leadership incubator that trains former Service Members interested in running for office. Continuing, he points out that as the number of veterans on Capitol Hill has dropped, there has been “an almost parallel decrease in America’s confidence in Congress.”^x

“I’m not saying that the two are necessarily a causal relationship,” says Lynn. “But I do think that there is that ability to put your country before yourself, but also to work together across party lines, that Americans want more that just isn't happening in Washington.”

The all-volunteer military engenders a sense of duty and “selflessness” that Lynn and others feel has been lacking in the political arena. He sees this quality as a motivation for veteran-candidates today.

Two of the ways that military experience sets the veteran apart is the leadership experience and education in critical thinking. Further, the experience and education must meet a high standard of ethical and honorable behavior. Service Members are held to the higher standard of a Code of Ethics and more importantly, by the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

How does the Code of Ethics affect the standard of behavior and does this translate to behaviors that make veterans uniquely suited for political office?

- Defines accepted/acceptable behaviors.
- Promotes high standards of practice.
- Provides a benchmark for members to use for self-evaluation.
- Establishes a framework for professional behavior and responsibilities^{xi}.

"There's a certain level of trustworthiness when you have somebody who has a record of putting their life on the line to serve the American people," said Andrea Bozek, spokeswoman for the National Republican Congressional Committee.

Since the latest election there is a new generation entering the political arena, veterans of over a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. IVC founder and Marine reservist Kieran Michael Lalor wrote on the group's web page (www.iraqvetsforcongress.com) “Voters want to restore leadership and honor back to Washington. Who better to accomplish that mission than our generation of warriors?”^{xii}

III. Second Service

BG Christopher P. Hughes, Deputy Commanding General CAC-LD&E and Deputy Commandant, CGSC, previously served as Chief of Army Liaison to the US House of

Representatives, stated military values such as discipline and critical thinking skills are important aspects to bring to political office, ones that may lead to success. He continued,

“The person in political office is there to protect the interests of constituents first and this is done by:

- Supporting legislation that is your passion; if you are a veteran, this may mean areas of Veterans Affairs, defense, etc.
- Supporting topics in areas that you are experienced—a subject matter expert—and in areas that define you, such as farming or gun control.
- Understanding the baseline of your state or district’s needs and mastering that.”

Public office may be a natural “next or second service” for many veterans. While Army Values outline the expected behavior, attitude and beliefs of Service Members and the culture they create, these leadership qualities also remarkably answer many of the problems that the public sees in elected officials and, generally, in today’s government^{xiii}: These leadership qualities include:

- Influencing: getting people to do what is required. Through words and personal example, leaders communicate purpose, direction and motivation.
- Purpose: gives others the reason to achieve a desired outcome.
- Direction: involves clearly communicating.
- Motivation: supplies the will and initiative by affecting others by your actions and words.
- Improving the organization: is the act of stewardship, creating effective and efficient organizations.

Following the Sept 11 attacks, Joe Kearns Goodwin enlisted in the Army, served combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan and rose to the rank of captain. Now a veteran, he ran in last September’s Democratic primary for Massachusetts’ Senate seat when he saw the need for Congress to work together.

“Before we went on patrol, nobody asked, ‘Are you a Democrat or a Republican?’

No one asked if you were from a blue state or a red state, a progressive or a

conservative. We were just, 'What do we need to do to get the job done?'" That is the attitude he wants to bring to public office.

Rep Steve Israel of New York, past Chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee said about veterans in politics, "They are the perfect contrast to a do-nothing member of Congress who is willing to shut down the government versus a veteran who devoted his or her life to serving their country."

Tom Cotton, the Republican nominee in Arkansas' 4th Congressional District race, compared his decision to run with his decision to join the Army in 2005.

"At that time, it was an attack from a foreign enemy, and we were in an active war. And now we're in a debt crisis that threatens our future prosperity and, therefore, ultimately freedom," says Cotton, 35, who declined a commission as a legal officer to go into the Infantry.

A recently elected veteran, Joni Ernst, the first female combat veteran to serve in the Senate, sealed the Senate for the GOP majority last fall. She served in Operation Iraqi Freedom and has been in the National Guard since 1993; she is a uniquely-suited veteran in a "second service" who gathered the support of voters in Iowa. A spokesman for the Iowa National Guard says Soldiers don't "punch the clock. We serve regardless of our situations and Colonel Ernst doesn't want to be treated any differently."^{xiv}

IV. Strategies for "Second Service": HOW TO WIN

Veterans Campaign is a nonpartisan program of the National Association for Uniformed Service Members (NAUS). They empower and encourage veterans to continue their public service, a second service, as elected officials and is the first organization to offer non-ideological research and training for veterans by holding campaign training workshops, informational lectures, and conducting research all directly aimed at engaging veterans in the electoral process.

"We believe that our country's veterans are a valuable yet untapped resource of potential elected leadership. Veterans possess many qualities our country needs in its public officials:

outstanding leadership experience in the face of adversity, familiarity with a broad cross-section of American society, and an intimate understanding of the human consequences of Washington’s foreign policy decisions. Most importantly, veterans have demonstrated their willingness to put America and its citizens before their own well-being.”

Today more than ever, our country needs more veterans in public office. It’s winning hearts and minds.^{xv}

As the number of candidates with a military background rises, so does a network of support groups that range from well-financed groups with political action committees to small efforts that are little more than a web site. However, together they are force multipliers, campaign analysts say, helping candidates raise money, gain notice, and refine their message.

Groups that support veterans in political office include: Combat Veterans for Congress – Embedded Integrity; Afghanistan & Iraq Veterans for Congress; Iraq Veterans for Congress; and, National Defense PAC (NDPAC). Both parties have formed internal veteran-centric groups, such as the Republican Iraq Veterans for Congress that supports their candidates, and the Fighting Dems that chartered themselves the Veterans for a Secure America (VSA) that supports Democrats.

It is well known that money, media attention, and an agenda are necessary to win elections.

Money is the fuel that sparks and moves the campaign. For the first time in history, most members of Congress are millionaires^{xvi}; and without campaign reform, the legislature will continue to be and must be wealthy because only the rich have access to the amount of capital needed to get elected.

Fundraising: What Winning Campaigns Have Cost

	House	Senate
1986	\$359,577	\$3,067,559.00
1996:	\$686,198	\$3,921,653.00
2006:	\$1,259,791	\$8,835,416.00 ^{xvii}

2016: \$2,519,582 \$19,012,496.00 (predicted)

Since few veterans can personally afford the type of campaign necessary to win, key strategy is you don't campaign alone. Candidates need a full array of analysts, advertisers, researchers, writers, marketers, and fund raisers along with a core group of aides who plan, organize, and direct the fight for office: all are expensive.

Politics is about marketing yourself and media attention can put a candidate in the spotlight, a campaign necessity because you cannot win if your name and ideas (agenda) are unknown to voters. Often being a veteran will get attention upfront; but military background can only be the beginning and not the entire campaign. Constituents want to hear about what you're actually going to do as a candidate.

Former Army Ranger Kevin Strouse, of Pennsylvania's 8th Congressional District, recounts how he helped clear a city block in Iraq during the rescue of prisoner of war Jessica Lynch in 2003. The story is meant to show his experience working with others to accomplish a goal. "In the military, it's always a team effort," says Strouse, who completed three tours in Afghanistan and one in Iraq and is now campaigning as a Democrat. "There's a hierarchy, but things get done because people work together."

In Arizona, Republican Martha McSally put her military service at the forefront of her second Congressional campaign and emphasized what she calls the Air Force's core values. "Service before self, integrity and excellence in all we do," says McSally, the first woman in U.S. history to command a fighter squadron in combat. "And those are the character traits that are sorely lacking" in Washington. She narrowly lost last year to Ron Barber, a former aide to Democrat Gabrielle Giffords.

Strouse and McSally are among more than a dozen veterans recruited to run for the House last year. Both parties sought out candidates whose records allow them to appear to be perfect antidotes for the partisan, gridlocked Washington. Each side hoped its challengers could run effectively against incumbents linked to a national capital that, polls show, the public detests.^{xviii}

IV. CONCLUSION

Currently, there is strong negative public opinion about politics, both parties, and politicians; many voters complain that politicians are self-serving and refuse to work together to do their job, to run the business of our government. The media seems to detail charges against politicians almost daily; statistics show that more elected officials have been convicted of criminal activity in the last five years than in any timeframe previously. For the first time, most members of Congress are millionaires, placing them in the top 16.3 million households in America^{xix}, leading voters to wonder what Congress may have in common with the majority of Americans.

Constituents, on the other hand, have very positive opinions about veterans, citing the behaviors and competencies followed in service that show a value system of duty, respect, selfless service, ethical behavior and leadership. Each of these values fit a need in political office and reflect the unique standards veterans are committed to personify, making veterans uniquely suited to fill political office.

When the public is looking for leaders, they search for work ethic, look for intelligence, search for character, and look at education as well as a measure of common sense, respect, and honesty. The necessary qualifications of our elected officials are up to the voters; we choose their qualifications when we decide what matters most. Voters can make the informed decision that military service will somehow make a better public servant.^{xx}

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ⁱⁱ Lachman, Samantha, The Huffington Post POLITICS. Feb 25, 2015. "Given How Americans Feel About Congress, It's Shocking Anyone Got Elected At All."

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Page, Susan. USA TODAY, Nov 17, 2014. "Poll: Resistance to Obama order on Immigration:

^v The Harris Poll #85. Pollack, Hannah, Harris Poll Research Analyst. NY. Sept 10, 2014.

^{vi} Wikipedia. List of American state and local politicians convicted of crimes. 6MAR 2015. Wikimedia Foundation.

^{vii} George, Bill, Harvard Business School. 06 JUN 2011. Working Knowledge, "Why Leaders Lose Their Way".

^{viii} Veteran's Campaign Field Manual

^{ix} DeGeorge, Richard T. Military Ethics: A Code of Ethics for Officers. Washington: National Defense University Press, 1987.

^x Associated Press, Sept 30, 2012. Many Iraq, Afghanistan war veterans choosing 'second service' by going into politics. Raleigh NC

^{xi} Website: Life Skills Coaches Association of BC

^{xii} Pope, Charles, The Oregonian. "Veterans in Politics". 21 JAN 2015.

^{xiii} ADRP 6-22 1-1. 01AUG, 2012.

^{xiv} Johnson, Benny. National Review Online, NOV 7, 2014. "Senator Soldier: A Day After Winning, Joni Ernst Is Back in Fatigues".

^{xv} Simon, Scott. NPR 2014.

^{xvi} Choma, Russ. Center for Responsive Politics. Millionaires' Club: For First Time, Most Lawmakers are Worth \$1Million-Plus. Jan 9, 2014.

^{xvii} Analysis of Federal Election Commission data. Brookings Institution Press, 2008.

^{xviii} Freking, Keven. Nov 2013. "Military Veterans Campaign as can-do candidates"

^{xix} <http://www.cnbc.com/id/101743657>

^{xx} Rowe, Mike. Mike's Blogs, Profoundly Disconnected. "Off the Wall: confusing Qualifications with Competency is the Point". FEB 18, 2015.

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CGSC Professional Biography

Ms Rhonda Quillin is a US Army Veteran and as the editor for the Department of Tactics for over six years, she has prepared coursework for the tactical and operational levels of war. She has also assisted the Department of Command & Leadership as well as the Digital Leader Development Center on their courseware. She is a published writer and has authored several scholarly studies. Her recent professional papers include “Media and the US Army in Warfare”, and the 2014 Ethics Symposium paper, “The Importance of Unit Climate in Affecting Moral Injury”.

Prior to editing for CGSC, she authored and edited federal submissions and journal publications for international pharmaceutical companies. She also has written communications for the Food and Drug Administration and the National Health Institute.

She earned a BS from the University of Texas-El Paso and an MFA in Multimedia Communication from Abilene Christian University.