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A New Generation of Leaders

A Report on America's Perceptions of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans

To: Interested Parties

From: Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research and Public Opinion
Strategies

Since 9/11, nearly 2.4 million American men and women have returned home as veterans following their military service. The public regards them, overwhelmingly, as national assets whose discipline and leadership enables them to capably serve their nation and their communities. Indeed, compared to almost any other group in the nation, the country describes these men and women as very valuable to the country. These young men and women come home to an America that views them very differently than when the country was asked about veterans returning from Vietnam.

At the same time, the country remains mindful of the physical and emotional cost of war on the veteran population. Many describe these veterans as angry or depressed and a majority believe, incorrectly, that most returning veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. The public believes these men and women have done their part and deserve time to recover; the veterans community, however, understands that what these men and women need most is service and the opportunity to lead their communities.

More broadly, the country believes we are not doing enough for the men and women coming back, particularly when it comes to jobs.

This survey of 801 adults throughout the country represents one of the few in-depth looks at the country's perceptions of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. This survey was commissioned as part of a larger public-private partnership between The Mission Continues and Bad Robot. The survey was executed by a bi-partisan research team of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research and Public Opinion Strategies. The survey carries an overall margin of error of +/- 3.46 at a 95 percent confidence interval.

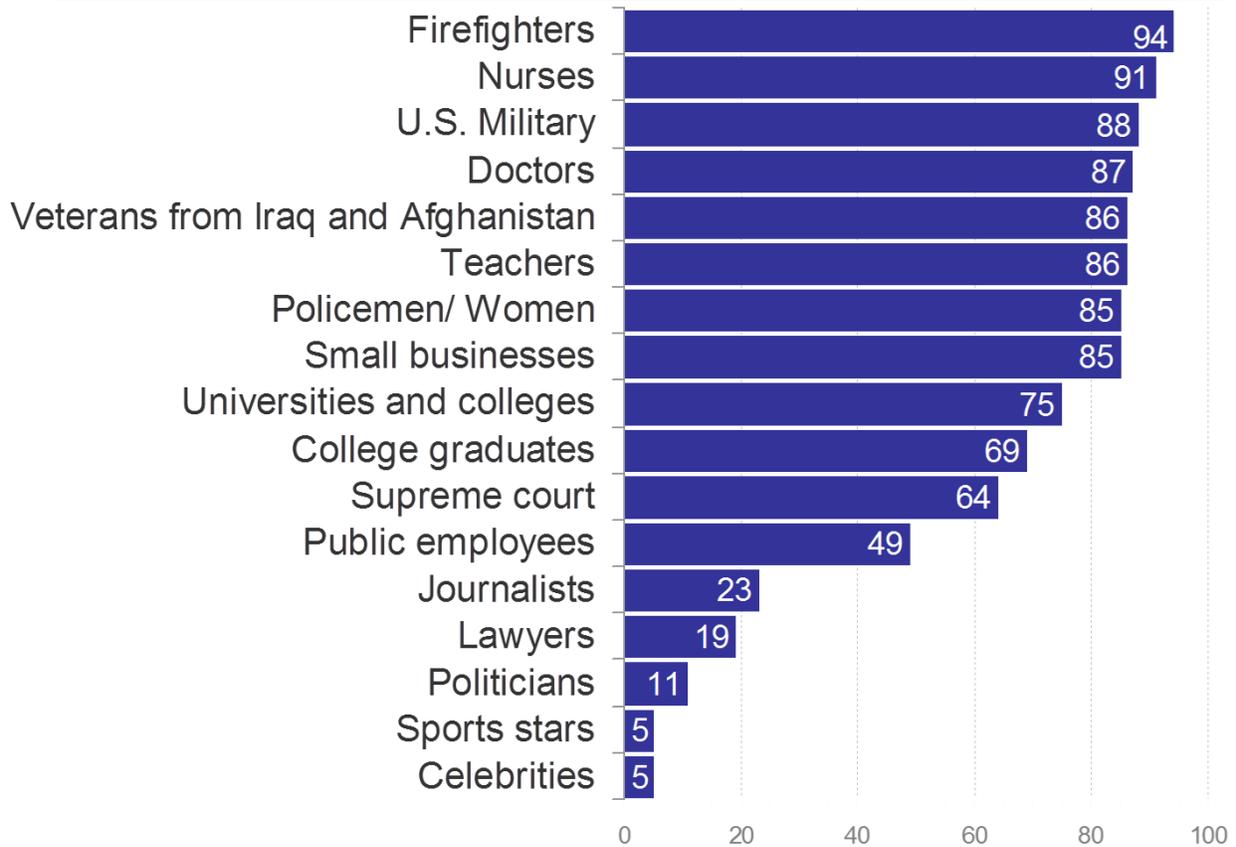
Main Findings

Compared to almost any other group of people, the country regards Iraq and Afghanistan veterans as national assets.

By a huge margin (86 percent), Americans describe “military veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan,” as very valuable assets to the country. This puts them on a level with doctors, nurses, teachers and firefighters and above college graduates and, not entirely surprisingly, lawyers and politicians.

Figure 1: Valuable Figures in Society

I am going to name a number of different groups of people and institutions in this country. I would like you to rate each as either a very valuable asset to this country, a somewhat valuable asset to this country, not a very valuable asset to this country or a not valuable asset at all to this country.



Moreover, 64 percent agree with the statement, “the skills and leadership learned by veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan can be effectively applied to our communities.” Just 29 percent believe, “the skills and leadership learned by veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan apply mostly to military situations.”

Misplaced assumptions about veterans undermines their public standing and potential as community assets.

Across several measures, the American public perceives Iraq and Afghanistan veterans differently than they perceived Vietnam veterans, yet some stereotypes remain. On average, today’s veterans have a higher level of education than their peers. Much of the public believes otherwise. Respondent also incorrectly assume that a majority of returning veterans suffer from PTSD.

In this survey, we asked respondents to rate a series of statement as either true or untrue. A number of misplaced stereotypes emerge in this battery.

Figure 2: Perceptions of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans

Statement	Percent describing statement as true	Percent describing statement as untrue	The facts:
A majority of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD.	53	20	Untrue ⁱ
On average, veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have higher levels of education than the non-veteran population.	19	45	True ⁱⁱ
On average, veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are more likely to suffer from drug addiction and/or alcoholism than the non-veteran population.	27	44	Not true ⁱⁱⁱ
Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are no more likely to commit suicide than the non-veteran population.	28	40	True ^{iv}

The public places veterans ahead of their peers, but also recognizes the costs of war.

On most traits, the public believes Iraq and Afghanistan veterans exceed their peers, at least who choose between veterans and their peers. This is particularly true when it comes to willingness to work hard, being an asset to the community, and having a strong character. However, the public also recognizes the cost of war. Whereas the Vietnam generation of veterans was disproportionately associated with drugs and alcohol, this generation of veterans is disproportionately associated with the stress, depression and anger.

Figure 3: Perceptions Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans vs. their non-military peers

<i>Now I'm going to read you some characteristics, and for each, I'd like you to tell me if today it applies more to the average young veteran who happened to serve anywhere in the Armed Forces since 9/11, to the average young person who didn't happen to serve during that time, or if it applies equally to both groups?</i>	More served	More Not served	Both equal	Don't know/ not sure
Disciplined and willing to work hard	45	4	48	2
Strong moral character	38	4	53	3
An asset and leader in their community	35	4	55	5
Being able to hold a steady job	24	8	65	3
Stable	22	11	58	8
Stressed	40	5	52	3
Depressed	38	4	52	4
Having problems with anger or rage	28	6	59	5
Drinking too much or having problems with alcohol	13	9	69	7
Using drugs	8	20	60	9

Much of the public believe these veterans need time to recovery; veterans know they want and need service.

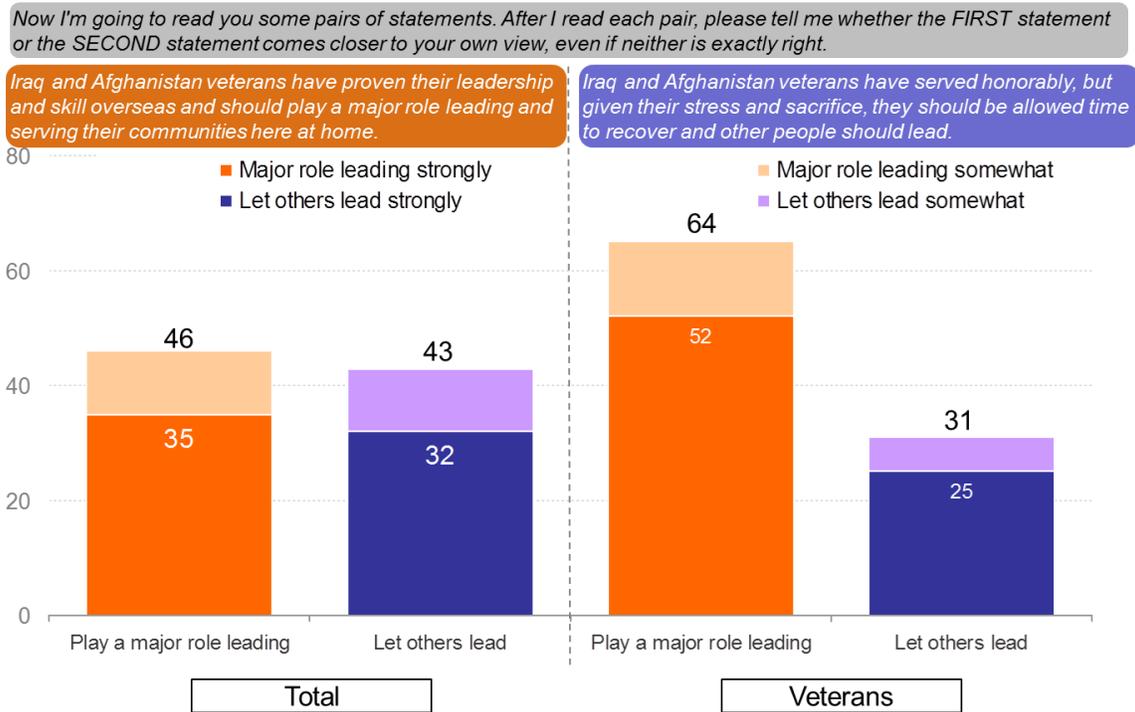
Only half (46 percent) believe, “Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have proven their leadership and skill overseas and should play a major role leading and serving their communities here at home.” Another 43 percent believe, “Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have served honorably, but given their stress and sacrifice, they should be allowed time to recover and other people should lead.” Young people (55 percent second statement) in particular argue these men and women should be allowed time to recover and other people should lead.

Veterans disagree.¹

By a 64 to 31 margin, veterans believe Iraq and Afghanistan veterans should assume a leadership role in their communities.

¹ This includes all military veterans.

Figure 4: Perception of Veterans as Community Leaders



The country puts Iraq and Afghanistan veterans in a different place than returning Vietnam veterans.

In 1979, the Veterans Administration commissioned a survey with Louis Harris and Associates Polling Firm of 2,563 adults asking to compare Vietnam veterans to the average young person who did not serve in Vietnam. Similarly, this survey asks the public to compare Iraq and Afghanistan veterans to their generational peers. On issues of discipline, use of drugs, and involvement in their community, Iraq and Afghanistan veterans hold a different place than Vietnam veterans did in the eyes of the country in the late 70's. Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are perceived as being more disciplined and willing to work hard, and being more involved in their communities and less likely to use drugs. It is striking that the public assumes this generation has less of a problem with drugs than their non-military peers, a different assumption than during the Vietnam era.

Figure 5: Perceptions of Vietnam Veterans vs. Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans

<i>Now I'm going to read you some characteristics, and for each, I'd like you to tell me if today it applies more to the average young veteran who happened to serve anywhere in the Armed Forces (during the Vietnam era/since 9/11), to the average young person who didn't happen to serve during that time, or if it applies equally to both groups?</i>	More served	More Not served	Both equal	Don't know /not sure
Disciplined and willing to work hard				
Iraq/Afghanistan veterans	45	4	48	2
Vietnam veterans ²	19	12	64	1
Using drugs				
Iraq/Afghanistan veterans	8	20	60	9
Vietnam veterans	30	7	58	5
Taking an active role in school and community affairs				
Iraq/Afghanistan veterans	24	12	59	5
Vietnam veterans	10	20	59	10
Being well-educated, trained and prepared to take a job				
Iraq/Afghanistan veterans	25	8	62	4
Vietnam veterans	15	28	50	6
Willing to become involved and take an active role on issues and in politics				
Iraq/Afghanistan veterans	31	7	55	5
Vietnam veterans	16	16	60	8
Being able to actually get a job				
Iraq/Afghanistan veterans	18	13	60	5
Vietnam veterans	15	20	59	6
Drinking too much or having problems with alcohol				
Iraq/Afghanistan veterans	13	9	69	7
Vietnam veterans	19	6	69	5

² All data points with Vietnam veterans refer to the Louis Harris survey conducted in 1979

The public believes the country is not doing a good job assisting returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, particularly when it comes to jobs.

By a 54 to 28 percent margin, Americans believe, “the country is not doing a good job assisting returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans,” (61 percent among veteran households). Moreover, A 58 percent majority describe the benefits provided veterans as “less than adequate.”

When asked about the biggest challenge facing veterans on an open-ended question, a 51 percent majority volunteer finding a job/finding employment. Other responses include readjusting/assimilating to society/civilian life (20 percent), psychological/mental health problems (16 percent) and PTSD (8 percent), and getting adequate health care (5 percent) among others. The public has the same agenda for veterans as it has for the rest of the country.

While it may not be as important as the jobs issue, by better than a 2:1 margin, the public supports revising GI Bill benefits to include funding for returning veterans to perform two years of volunteer service with non-profits in their communities (62 percent favor, 25 percent oppose).

ⁱBetween 11 percent and 20 percent of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are believed to have symptoms of PTSD according to multiple studies from the Veterans Administration and a 2008 Rand Study.

ⁱⁱ From 2000-2009, a higher percentage of Veterans than non-Veterans had completed some college, but not a degree. While Veterans lagged behind non-Veterans for completion of a Bachelor’s degree, there was a significant increase in the percentage of Veterans with a Bachelor’s degree between 2000 and 2009. The percentage of Veterans with an advanced degree was higher than that of non-Veterans each year and increased significantly over the decade.

ⁱⁱⁱ In 2011, the VA listed the prevalence of Drug Abuse among OEF and OIF veterans at 4 percent Drug Dependence at 3 percent, and Alcohol dependence at 7 percent. According to a 2011 study of 456,502 OIF and OEF veterans published in the "Drug Alcohol Dependence Journal", over 11 percent received substance use disorder diagnoses (10 percent Alcohol, 5 percent drugs, 3 percent both).

In 2010, the rate of substance dependence or abuse among U.S. adults aged 18 to 25 (19.8 percent) was higher than that among youths aged 12 to 17 (7.3 percent) and among adults aged 26 or older (7.0 percent). Among young adults aged 18 to 25, the rate of alcohol dependence or abuse remained unchanged between 2009 (16.0 percent) and 2010 (15.6 percent). Among adults aged 26 or older, the rate remained stable between 2009 (6.3 percent) and 2010 (5.9 percent) and between 2002 (6.2 percent) and 2010.

^{iv} From FY 2003 - 2008, the average rate of suicides was 27 per 100,000 OEF/OIF veterans (male and female combined) enrolled in VA health care.

The overall U.S. rate is around 11.3 suicide deaths per 100,000 people, Young adults ages 20 to 24 — 12.7 per 100,000