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American Businesses, Veterans, and Military Discounts

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Introduction

"I think there is a certain subculture in the military that has grown to expect the perks and admiration and adulation. I think that a lot of folks are starting to feel that way without realizing it. While I certainly think that what the military has done over the past decade is admirable, we don't want to feel entitled to a certain treatment different from other citizens. Ours should be a culture of selfless service and selfless leadership." Marine Maj. Peter Munson, the author of "War, Welfare & Democracy: Rethinking America's Quest for the End of History."[1]

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Major Munson succinctly describes the underlying premise of this paper; a large portion of uniformed members, veterans, and family members have developed an unhealthy sense of entitlement after nearly twelve years of continuous war. This sense of isolation, and at times, superiority, is "not healthy in an armed force serving a democracy." [23] To be sure, many of our veterans have made substantial sacrifices, as has been the case throughout American history. As the gap between those who have and have not served in the military continues to widen, actions, well intentioned as they may be, that reinforce this distinction impede the necessary task of reintegrating veterans into society. This paper, part historical case study and part editorial, will look back to WWII, Vietnam, and Desert Storm to examine how our society arrived at a point where every veteran is a *hero*, and how superficial discounts now substitute for genuine shared sacrifice.

Historical Context

WW II, National Sacrifice, and a Hero's Welcome

During World War II, American automobile manufacturers focused much of their production on the war effort. The market for personal automobiles during the war sputtered as gasoline was rationed, rubber was diverted to the front, and a moratorium was placed on the production of new cars. American automakers produced 3 million cars in 1941, with just 139 more made during the rest of the war.[4] By late 1942, General Motors (GM) dedicated 95% of its output to the war effort.[5] Chrysler manufactured aircraft fuselages. Packard assembled Rolls-Royce engines for British aircraft, and the Ford Motor Company turned out a new B-24 bomber every 63 minutes.[6]

Automobile manufacturers were not alone in these herculean war efforts. The Mattatuck Manufacturing Company moved from making upholstery fasteners to producing clips for Springfield rifles. The American Brass Company produced more than two billion pounds of brass materials. The Chase Brass and Copper Company produced more than 50 million cases and mortar shells, over a billion small arms rounds, and eventually made components used by scientists working the Manhattan Project.[7] These contributions are notable but tell only half of the story. The manpower—and perhaps more accurately, womanpower—required to produce this much war material is the other half.

During the pre-war era, women comprised one percent of the U.S. aircraft industry's workforce. This number spiked to 65% in 1943 while Rosie the Riveter became one of the best recruitment tools in U.S. history.[8] Men, too, contributed greatly to the industrial war effort. Men who were physically disqualified from military service saw it as an obligation to serve in whatever capacity they could. Children also participated in any way they could. So-called "Victory Gardens" were planted at elementary schools to ease the burden of food rationing, and many teenagers lied about their age to gain employment in factories.[9]

World War II saw the mobilization of American industry that combined with unprecedented labor initiatives had the effect of creating a shared burden. The "boys" may have been away fighting on foreign shores, but Rosie and the rest of America were at home doing as much as they could to help ensure victory. Following World War II, service members came home to a population that had sacrificed with them, and while sacrifices on the battlefield are much different than those on the home front, a sense of shared responsibility and accomplishment existed. National pride and shared sacrifice, the defeat of fascism, government backed home loans, and money for education were, in most cases, enough compensation for those who had won a hard fought victory. If *harmony* translates to peaceful agreement, mutual respect, and understanding, then the post-war era represents the zenith of military-civilian harmony.

Coming Home from Vietnam

"They treated us terrible when we came home." These are the words of Dan Mahoney during a 2013 interview with the *Troy Record*.[10] Mahoney served with the 101st Airborne. He recounted being escorted through a California airport by police in order to keep anti-war protestors at bay.[11] Diane Mazur, in her book *A More Perfect Military*, challenges many of the widely accepted narratives of how veterans were treated during homecomings, including her assertion that no data exists to support the infamous claims of veterans being spit on. Regardless of whether soldiers were spit on, shouted at, refused service, or called names, it is a fact that soldiers returning from Vietnam came home under much different circumstances than those of their fathers following WWII. Anti-war activists mistakenly condemned the soldier along with the policy-maker. As recently as 2012, President Obama poignantly characterized the period as "a national shame, a disgrace that should have never happened. . . . Even though Americans turned their back on you, you never turned your back on America."[12]

While American industry went all-in with its support of the war effort during the 1940s, times changed considerably by the 1960s, with the military industrial complex that President Eisenhower warned of now in full swing. Ford did not have to shut down its assembly lines to manufacture bombers. The American workforce that blossomed in the years following WWII remained largely unaffected. The feelings of shared sacrifice and national unity of effort were replaced with bitter political distrust and widespread anti-war protests. Contributing to a general ambivalence towards the war (and those who fought it) was the fact that military members made up a much smaller portion of the overall U.S. population than during WWII. From 1941 to 1945, over nine percent of the U.S. population directly participated in the Armed Forces. During the Vietnam War (1962-1973), that number was under two percent.[13] President Obama's lament describes the nadir of American military-civilian harmony.

If the pendulum of civil-military harmony was lodged on the positive end of the spectrum following WWII, it had swung fully in the opposite direction following Vietnam. Time is said to heal all wounds, and nearly twenty years after the fall of Saigon, the American public had an opportunity to right the wrongs of the past. Operation DESERT SHIELD/STORM was a rousing success for the American military. General Schwarzkopf led U.S. and coalition forces to a quick and decisive victory over Saddam Hussein. While the American economy and civilian population were again largely unaffected, the sense of national pride and gratitude expressed to returning veterans was ardent; the pendulum had reversed itself again.

Longer, Much Longer with Less

Today's all-volunteer active duty force constitutes less than one percent of the American population.[14] How this number came to be, and the relevance it bears, is open to countless interpretations.[15] The fact remains: a very small fraction of the American population now serves in uniform. Further illustrating the gap between those who have and have not served, a recent Pew Research Poll concluded fewer than 35% of 18-29 year olds have a family member in the military.[16] It is not merely the act of service that sets today's veterans apart from society: it is also the nature of their service.

In 2010, USA Today reported more than 13,000 troops had served three to four cumulative years in Iraq or Afghanistan.[17] Soldiers returning from World War II, in most cases, did so once. Stephen Maxner, a military historian and director of the Vietnam Center and Archive says the same of Vietnam veterans: "Small numbers of soldiers volunteered for multiple tours in Vietnam, but the vast majority

served single, year-long deployments."[18] Multiple tours, and at one point "stop-loss" retention measures, meant many soldiers were away from their families more frequently and for longer periods of time than in previous wars. While fewer soldiers were shouldering a larger burden, life at home largely marched on unaffected.

American civilians, with the exception of media reporting and acquaintance, remained insulated from the fighting. The Pew Poll found that 50% of Americans felt the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had little impact on their lives.[19] Today, the shared sense of duty and sacrifice that prevailed during the 1940s is absent. Civilians go about their lives focusing on matters of employment, insurance, financial security, and other domestic issues. Aside from the initial economic shock of the 9/11 attacks, American industry survives mostly unaffected by the wars. The Great Recession that began in 2008 had a much more profound effect on the economy than any direct war related efforts.[20] GM and Ford, as during Vietnam, do not shoulder the burden of building jeeps or aircraft. Apple and Microsoft continued producing iPods and X-Box's. Flush with a sense of patriotism in the post 9/11 era, the vexing question for corporate and civilian American was, and continues to be, how, and to what extent, should they express their appreciation to this small group of citizens who fought a largely unpopular war? Unfortunately, the answer seems to come in the form of fawning displays of gratitude and unbridled deference that often ignore the challenging task of reintegration.

Heroes, Home Depot, and Hubris

"We can't all be heroes; some of us have to stand on the curb and watch as they go by."
Will Rogers

The term *hero* evokes an emotional response when used to describe the actions of Medal of Honor Recipients Vice Admiral James Stockdale, Lieutenant Michael Murphy, and Sergeant First Class Leroy Petry. These men, and many like them, "distinguished [themselves] conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of [their] life above and beyond the call of duty."[21] Few, if any, reasonable people would argue that these men's actions were not heroic. Admittedly, being awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor should not be viewed as the sole gateway to hero status; however, in the post 9/11 era the word *hero* has been bandied about by an uneasy populace to the point of banality, creating two unintended consequences.

First, the term itself loses gravitas when applied so ubiquitously, and risks debasing the actions of men like Stockdale, Murphy, and Petry. Second, when veterans and their families view themselves as heroes simply because they served, it only widens the unhealthy gap between "us and them." A civilian society that is as far removed from the realities of war as ours, often knows no better way to express support than to hand out superficial labels, sometimes masking a deeper misunderstanding or distrust.[22] Veterans who routinely receive praise as heroes can begin to see themselves as separate from the society they serve. These newly minted heroes may view themselves as better, braver, more deserving, and worse; forget the binary nature and literal meaning of *citizen-soldier*. In a July 2013 op-ed piece, General Dempsey, the nation's highest ranking military officer, cautioned, "We need to guard against suggestions that we deserve admiration because we volunteered to serve when others didn't. We are an all-volunteer force, but we are not all who volunteer."[23] Unfortunately, General Dempsey's message was not received by all who needed to hear it.

What's in a Discount?

Absent a requirement to militarize production lines or enact conscription, American industry and society writ large, have graciously sought ways to contribute in meaningful ways to the men and

women who serve in the military. The most common manner of accomplishing this is by offering so-called military discounts. Chevrolet no longer builds amphibious landing craft, but a veteran can get a good deal on a pick-up truck. These discounts, as has been stated, are gracious but can appear duplicitous in nature. Are companies using soldiers and flag waving patriotism to sell beer, airline tickets, and automobiles, or are their motives driven by genuine altruism? The answer to that question opens the door for unnecessary cynicism, but what is undeniable is that military discounts are now so common that they have become expected. The GI Bill, VA Loans, health care, and various other codified benefits are no longer enough for some veterans. Some want, demand even, discounts on lumber and lawn mowers. The expectation of unnecessary and private benefits defies the all-volunteer force's underlying premise of selfless sacrifice.

According to its website, Home Depot U.S.A. Inc is the world's largest home improvement retailer with more than 1,500 stores in North America.[24] Home Depot actively recruits and employs thousands of veterans and, unlike many other American companies, contributed millions of dollars-worth of tools and material directly to the war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. For the past several years they have also offered a 10% military discount to veterans and their families. By most accounts, Home Depot is a "military friendly" organization.

William Carney of Pace, Florida feels differently. Carney is a self-identified veteran who routinely shops (or shopped) at his local Home Depot enjoying its military discount. On a recent trip, he purchased $356 worth of merchandise, showed his military ID, and was surprised to find on his receipt that he had only saved eight dollars with the discount. This represented a savings of two percent instead of the roughly $35 dollars he expected. When he asked the clerk about the apparent discrepancy, he was informed that Home Depot had changed the policy governing military discounts, and now not all in-stock items were eligible for the discount. Feeling the clerk was mistaken he spoke with a manager who confirmed the new "reduced item" policy. Mr. Carney wrote a letter to his local newspaper titled *Home Depot* ***Dishonors*** *Our Military* (emphasis added).[25] Extensive internet research suggests that not all Home Depots have implemented this change. It remains unclear if the Pace, Florida branch was acting alone in the policy change, or if the national headquarters simply failed to synchronize the change nationwide. In the end, either outcome is irrelevant.

Military discounts are benefits, voluntary benefits, offered to veterans as a symbolic gesture of appreciation. In many cases, the discounts are offered out of sense of obligation so as not to be seen as unpatriotic. Much like the absence of an American flag lapel pin on a politician's coat has been foolishly labeled disrespectful, companies that fail to offer military discounts are often seen as disloyal or unsupportive.[26] In the case of Home Depot, the benefits were offered by a company who also contributes greatly to veteran related projects that arguably do more to say "thank you" than offering a nominal discount on everyday purchases. Home Depot provides materials to build and modify homes for disabled veterans and was recognized by *G.I. Jobs* magazine as a "Top 25 Military-Friendly Employer".[27]

Mr. Carney's grievance, boorish as it may be, is emblematic of a growing problem within corners of the veteran community—one of entitlement and expectancy. A quick search of the internet reveals countless stories of veterans and families waging boycotts against local businesses that stopped offering military discounts. In 2011, Sears teamed with private donors to provide free holiday gift cards to active duty personnel and their families. Unfortunately, a computer glitch limited the registration time to only a few hours. In short order, more than 2,000 people posted comments on the company's Facebook page, many of them negative.[28] It is worth pointing out that Sears did not have to offer this promotion, not in 2011, and not in the three previous years.[29] Additionally, the program relied heavily on the generosity of outside donors for financial support. Finally, much like Home Depot, Sears spends

considerable effort recruiting, training, and hiring veterans. The 6,500 veterans that Sears plans to hire in 2014 will benefit much more from a job than from a gift card.[30] Employment and training closely match the nature of the GI Bill and VA Loans: the veteran and society benefit from a shared investment.

Those of us in uniform must recognize that the nation we serve is vastly different from the nation that went to war in decades past and very different from when this war began. The concept of shared sacrifice by those on the home front is nearly non-existent except for those eagerly awaiting emails or phone calls from loved ones in uniform. The industrial base is no longer required to reinvent itself to support war efforts. Instead of building tanks and trucks, companies, either through genuine altruism or shrewd marketing, have found a way to participate. Military discounts and special promotions are how an uneasy private sector says thank you, and are undeniably kind, but there are better ways.

The Veterans Administration reported in 2013 that nearly 50,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans were either homeless or in federal housing programs designed to keep them off the streets.[31] Instead of offering 10% discounts on routine purchases, businesses should direct that money to organizations providing skills training, resume preparation, and job placement. Mr. Carney may be interested to know that several non-profits, with Home Depot backing, have pledged to spend $80 million building and adapting homes for veterans by 2015.[32] Instead of providing nominal discounts on routine purchases, more companies should follow Home Depot's lead and express their support with lasting, meaningful acts that serve the veteran and his community. There is greater benefit in teaching a man to fish than in simply giving him a fish.

Conclusion

There should be no doubt that our men and women in uniform have made considerable sacrifices during the last twelve years of war. What veterans must understand, however, is that our nation has grown weary of war. The unflagging displays of patriotism and adulation heaped upon the military following the first Gulf War and particularly after 9/11 are waning. Businesses were shocked into financial uncertainty following the economic downturn of 2008. Profitability is more important that symbolism in free-market economies and the ability to offer sweeping discounts to veterans may prove unsustainable. Further risk comes in the form of legislative cuts to defense spending. A career in the military will not make one a millionaire, but the existing compensation is fair. Compared with many Americans in the private sector, military compensation is arguably more than fair. Veterans risk trading national deference for national contempt if we continue to bang the drum against compensation cuts, while at the same time enjoying private benefits that are unavailable to other citizens who volunteer for service*:* police, fire fighters, the Peace Corps, educators, and clergy. The fault does not lie in asking for fair compensation or even in resisting cuts; the fault lies in alienating ourselves from the citizens we serve with self-righteous behavior.

This discussion is not an indictment of veterans, their families, or the countless companies across America that graciously offer military discounts. I have benefitted from military discounts, will continue to do so, and do not struggle with feelings of hypocrisy. The reason is simple: as a veteran myself, I am keenly aware of the all-volunteer nature of our military, but as General Dempsey correctly pointed out, "We are not all who volunteer."[33]

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[1] Munson quoted in Tilghman. July 2013.

[2] Henceforth described collectively as *veterans*.
[3] Admiral Stanley Arthur, quoted in Ricks. July 1997.
[4] WETA, American Lives II Film Project. Public Broadcast System. September 2007.
[5] Snyder. October 31, 2011.
[6] WETA, American Lives II Film Project. Public Broadcast System. September 2007.
[7] Ibid.
[8] History.com. A&E Television Network. 2014.
[9] National World War II Museum. 2014.
[10] Benjamin. March 31, 2013.
[11] Benjamin. March 31, 2013.
[12] President Obama, quoted in Garcia. March 28, 2014.
[13] Segal and Segal. December 2004.
[14] Defense Manpower Data Center. March 31, 2014.
[15] The percentage of active duty military members has remained below 1% since the end of the draft in 1973.
[16] Pew Research Center. October 5, 2011.
[17] Zoroya. January 13, 2010.
[18] Maxner, quoted in Zoroya. January 13, 2010.
[19] Pew Research Center. October 5, 2011.
[20] A reasonable argument can be made regarding the effects to the economy from spending nearly $1 trillion in Iraq and Afghanistan.
[21] Text from Medal of Honor citation.
[22] Gronke and Feaver.
[23] Dempsey. July 3, 2013.
[24] http://www.homedepot.com
[25] Carney. Feb 5, 2014.
[26] Wright and Sunlen. October 4, 2007.
[27] http://www.homedepot.com
[28] Andi. December 1, 2011.
[29] Anonymous post to spousebuzz.com. September 2, 2011.
[30] Sears Holding Press Release. January 22, 2014.
[31] Zoroya. January 17, 2014.
[32] Foody. March 25, 2014.
[33] Dempsey. July 3, 2013.