

A SECOND ACT OF SERVICE

*Patriotism, not partisanship,
calls these veterans
to serve again*



By Matt Alderton

IF YOU JUDGE A country's health by the level of trust in its government, the U.S. may be in serious and not particularly stable condition, suggested the Pew Research Center. In a recent analysis of surveys dating to 1958, it found that public confidence in government reached a high of 77 percent in 1964, fell dramatically in the 1970s, recovered modestly in the 1980s and early 2000s, then plummeted to historic lows. Today, Pew reports, just 17 percent of Americans trust the government.

But if democracy is broken, there's at least one group that might be handy enough to fix it: veterans.

"Over the last 50 years, veteran representation in Congress has fallen from an all-time high of over 70 percent to historic lows of less than 18 percent. At the same time, Congress has become more polarized and is now the least-trusted public institution in the United States," said Marine Corps veteran Rye Barcott, co-founder and CEO of With Honor Action, a cross-partisan organization whose mission is advancing veteran leadership in elected office. "We don't think that's a coincidence."

When it analyzed congressional voting records, With Honor Action found that Congress tended to collaborate more across party lines when there were more veterans in its ranks. Veterans likewise score higher than nonveterans on The Lugar Center's Bipartisan Index, which measures how often members of Congress cross the aisle to sponsor or co-sponsor legislation.

"Everybody who has served has shown a proven commitment to putting public interest over self interest," Barcott continued. "When you serve in the U.S. military, you take an oath to support and defend the Constitution ... and potentially even (giving) your life in order to do it. That's the type of service, frankly, that we need a lot more of in our public institutions."

BORN TO SERVE

Veterans are as willing as they are wanted, according to Army veteran Nick

Armstrong, senior director for research and evaluation at Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF), which this month is hosting its inaugural Veterans Program for Politics and Civic Engagement, a weeklong residency during which veterans and military family members will receive a crash course in running for office. Although there's room for only 22 students, more than 600 veterans and spouses expressed interest in the program when it was announced in April, and nearly 160 submitted applications.

"As veterans, we have an inherent motivation to serve," Armstrong said.

Of course, there's also the paycheck. Although state and local officials typically earn much less, the base salary for most members of Congress is \$174,000. Active-duty soldiers, on the other hand, earn a starting salary of less than \$21,000 per year.

But veterans do it for the mission, not the money, said Barcott, who added that members of Congress typically maintain two households — one in their home district and another in Washington, D.C. — and often share apartments to make ends meet.

"There's a common misconception that Congress is a place where a lot of people make a lot of money. That's not the case, especially for young veterans, a lot of whom are married with kids," he said. "They're not doing it for the money. They're doing it for the country. They view it as another deployment."

WHY VOTERS VALUE VETS

Whatever veterans' reasons for running, the nation reaps significant rewards when they do, suggested Emily Cherniack, founder and executive director of New Politics, a bipartisan organization that recruits and supports public-service candidates for elected office.

"When (veterans) sign up to serve, they learn fundamental leadership skills," Cherniack said. "They learn how to work with diverse people from different backgrounds and different ideologies. They learn how to bring people together, and to lead people toward a mission greater than themselves.

They learn how to do boots-on-the-ground problem-solving."

In 2018, New Politics asked 1,200 registered voters which traits they most associate with veteran candidates. Their top answers were: teamwork (57 percent), honesty and integrity (50 percent) and working with diverse people (47 percent).

People want leaders who will work to get things done, Cherniack said. "Whether they're Republican or Democrat, veterans embody that type of leadership."

STUMPING SETBACKS?

Although veterans feel a lot of love on the campaign trail, military service can be a liability as well as an asset.

Take ego, for example — or the lack thereof. "When you're part of the military ... there is no individual. When you're a candidate, it's all about being an individual. It's your name on the sign," Cherniack noted. "Culturally, that's hard for them to wrap their heads around."

Veterans also face social and financial barriers. While other candidates may have been working lucrative jobs and networking with influential community leaders, they were deployed outside their districts, earning a modest living alongside fellow soldiers instead of potential donors.

"The cost to run for office has gone up faster than anything else in the United States — even health care," explained Barcott, who said the average House race costs more than \$4 million, with the most contested races exceeding \$15 million. "It's a prohibitively high barrier."

With or without structural challenges, veterans' campaigns face uncertain outcomes. That's the nature of elections. Even when veterans lose, however, the country wins, insisted Cherniack, who said the mere act of running "activates" veterans in their communities. "Running for office is a leadership experience, so win or lose they become better for having gone through it," she said. "Once they run, they become educated about the process and become leaders in the political space — whether they're elected or not. And that's helpful for our democracy."

CAMPAIGNING FOR CHANGE

Battlefield experience and training translate well at the ballot box for vets



CANDIDATE

**PETE
BUTTIGIEG**

Running for:
President of the
United States

Party:
Democratic

Home:
South Bend, Ind.

Branch served:
U.S. Navy Reserve

Age: 37

SCOTT OLSON/GETTY IMAGES

Before he was the first openly gay candidate to mount a major presidential campaign, and before he became the corn-fed mayor of South Bend, Ind., Pete Buttigieg was an anti-war protester. As an undergraduate at Harvard University, he spoke at a student rally opposing the Iraq War. Still, he walked into a recruiting center six years later and joined the U.S. Navy Reserve. He subsequently became a naval intelligence officer, and in 2014 — during his first term as mayor — was deployed for seven months to Afghanistan. Now he's vying to become the Democratic nominee for the nation's commander in chief.

As someone who opposed the Iraq War, what made you enlist?

I was knocking on doors in Iowa for Barack Obama in (the) winter of 2007-2008, right

around New Year's. I met so many young people in small towns ... who were serving, and it reminded me of how military service had become a big dividing line. For a previous generation, people who had gone to college and lived in cities were just as likely to serve as people from rural areas. But by the time I was growing up the reverse was the case. I huddled in a diner with my friends in Iowa trying to count the number of people we knew who had gone to Harvard who had served, and you could count them on one hand. I began to feel like unless I served I was part of the problem.

How did military service prepare you for executive office?

One thing you get from military service — especially if you've deployed — is a sense of calm. When you're an executive in govern-

ment you're often presented with a difficult decision ... where you have to make a choice that will not be easy no matter what. Being any kind of military officer gives you a sense of how to do that without losing your head.

How does being a veteran serve you on the campaign trail?

It not only allows me to explain where my heart is when it comes to service and why I care about keeping this country safe, but it gives me a way to talk to people very different from me. Even somebody who served in a different branch in a different conflict in a different generation, we still have something in common, which makes it easier to strike up a conversation and relate to each other. And at a time when we're so fragmented, having something like that to connect you to other people ... is an asset.

Floyd McLendon isn't the type to back down from a challenge.

Originally from the South Side of Chicago, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy Reserve in 1992 and became active-duty Navy shortly thereafter. Six years into his service, he decided to become a Navy SEAL — even though he didn't know how to swim. When he finally achieved his goal, it was because of the self-discipline and determination that his service instilled in him. Now, after 25 years in the military, the father of four wants to channel those same qualities into representing Texas' 32nd District in Congress.

Why are you running for Congress?

I did a legislative fellowship on Capitol Hill in 2017. I got to see the inner workings of Congress and how our representatives conduct their business. I was disheartened because I noticed they talk at each other instead of to each other. When you're a Navy SEAL, communication is the most important thing. We have to communicate in order to get the mission done. I feel like I bring that to the table and could be an example of how we should represent the people of our country.

In what ways do you think your service can be an asset in Congress?

Humans are afraid of change. They'd rather be comfortable with something they don't like than change to something that's uncertain. Military veterans don't have that luxury. We're used to changing commands every three to four years — going to another environment, being linked up with people we don't know and being responsible for a job we never did before. So we learn to adapt. Because our world is drastically changing, I think that adaptability will help me serve the American people so they continue to prosper.

What's your biggest challenge on the campaign trail?

The No. 1 challenge I've faced on the campaign trail is that the American people don't know what I've done in my military career and how that will translate into public office. That's a big challenge for most veterans who are running for office. We're coming from a different lane, so we have to be able to communicate what attributes and assets we bring to the table and how they translate to being a leader.



CANDIDATE
**FLOYD
MCLENDON**

Running for:
U.S. House of
Representatives

Party:
Republican

Home: Dallas

Branch served:
U.S. Navy

Age: 46

PROVIDED BY FLOYD MCLENDON

Amy McGrath was 13 years old when she decided to become a fighter pilot. There was just one problem: Women were banned from serving in combat at the time. Nevertheless, she went on to graduate from the U.S. Naval Academy and became the first woman in the Marine Corps to fly a combat mission in an F/A-18 fighter jet. The mother of three flew 89 combat missions during her 20-year career before returning to Kentucky, where she's now vying for Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's U.S. Senate seat.

You've already served once. What's calling you to serve again?

I'm called to do this "second service" because I feel like we need a new generation of leaders in this country. As veterans, we served our country, not our political party. We need leaders who have done that and have shown that they can put the country ahead of their own personal interests and their own political party. Both my husband and I are veterans. My husband served 20 years in the U.S. Navy. I was a Marine. I'm a Democrat; he's a Republican. For us, it's about America. It's about being an American first.

What do you think military veterans offer that political veterans don't?

Frankly, there are a lot of people like my opponent who have lived in the Washington, D.C., area for 35 years. We need people in leadership who have real-life experience in the 21st century globalized world. Also, veterans bring planning and pragmatism; it's nice to have great ideas, but you've got to have a plan for how to get things done. And finally, we as veterans take things like character, integrity and honor seriously, and I think we have a lack of that in our political leadership right now.

What's the most difficult

part about running for office as a veteran?

I haven't spent the last 30 years sitting here in Kentucky. I've been off doing the work of Uncle Sam, so I don't have the connections that lots of longtime politicians have. And let's just be frank about it: As veterans, we don't have a ton of rich friends. We served the country, and we got paid for it, but you don't go into military service and end up a millionaire. Because politics today is so money-driven, that's a big disadvantage.



CANDIDATE
**AMY
MCGRATH**

Running for:
U.S. Senate

Party:
Democratic

Home:
Georgetown, Ky.

Branch served:
U.S. Marine Corps

Age: 44

PROVIDED BY AMY MCGRATH

To some people, Bret Richards' America sounds like an America that only exists in history books. His hometown has a population of 350 people. He married his high school sweetheart. And he spent most of his adult life working in his family business: a small chain of convenience stores his parents started in 1977 and sold in 2015. But if you ask Richards — who served as a combat engineer in the U.S. Army — Main Street works a lot better than Capitol Hill does. That's why he's running to serve Iowa's 4th District in Congress.

Why did you decide to join the military, and to run for elected office?

It's not necessarily that I was destined to do it, but it's how I was raised. My uncle was in the Army in Korea. My dad was in Vietnam. Both my grandfathers served in (World War II). So there is a service component of who I am. And I don't think I'm done serving our country yet.

There are many ways to serve. Why did you choose Congress?

Like a lot of other people I know, I'm just tired of political bickering. We've got to do better. We need people in office who serve the country, then come back and live as average citizens again. That is the most motivating factor for me: We've got to elect people who care more about the country than their career.

How can veterans change Congress?

People who have served in the military know how to get things done. Of all the people I ever met in the military, I don't think I ever knew their political party. I assumed we had similar values in a lot of ways, but I didn't

care if they were a Democrat, a Republican or an Independent ... Congress is a great deal different from the military, but they're both about developing personal relationships. You have to show leadership to others who disagree with you, be logical, treat people civilly and find ways to get the right things done. That's what military people bring to the table.



CANDIDATE

**BRET
RICHARDS**

Running for:
U.S. House of
Representatives

Party:
Republican

Home:
Irwin, Iowa

Branch served:
U.S. Army

Age: 48

PROVIDED BY BRET RICHARDS

Patrick Batten may have taken a 15-year hiatus from politics, but he never took a break from public service. A graduate of San Diego State University, he spent seven years working on

political campaigns before enlisting in the U.S. Marine Corps at the age of 27. By that time, the father of four was married with children. During five overseas deployments, he left his family behind, but never alone. To thank the community that cared for them in his absence, Batten — who still serves in the Marine Corps Reserve — is running for a nonpartisan seat on the San Diego City Council.

Why do you want to serve on the City Council?

I spent a lot of time overseas when I was deployed. I

left my family in San Diego, but whenever I needed anything — whenever I couldn't be there — somebody in this community always stepped up, whether that was making sure my family was safely evacuated during the (2007 California wildfires) or fixing the water heater when it went out. For a six-pack of beer, somebody in the community was always willing to help out. This is an opportunity for me to continue my service and

give back to this community.

What do you think will be your greatest asset if you're elected?

The biggest asset I bring is problem-solving. As a Marine, you don't take no for an answer. Whether you're in combat, in training or just dealing with administrative issues, you find the solution to whatever problem arises. That's one of the biggest advantages that I have coming into this council.



CANDIDATE

**PATRICK
BATTEN**

Running for: San
Diego City Council

Party: Republican

Home: San Diego

Branch served:
U.S. Marine Corps

Age: 43

PROVIDED BY PATRICK BATTEN

Elected office is one way veterans have to give back. What do they receive in return?

My personal struggle coming back into society from the military was the fact that I felt alienated. Everybody wants to come

up and say thanks for your service, shake your hand and walk away. But then you still feel kind of alone. Politics and government are an opportunity to continue serving using the skills and life lessons that you learned in the military. When we as service members get elected to office, it shows us the incredible value that we provide to our country — not just in combat, but also when we return.

Born in Jamaica, Jackie Gordon immigrated at age 7 to the U.S. with her family and attended public school in Queens, N.Y. She was 20 years old when she saw a TV commercial in which the U.S. Army declared, “We do more before 9 a.m. than most people do all day.” In that commercial, she saw people working together and getting things done. In short, she saw herself. She enlisted in the Army Reserve in 1984 and retired in 2014 at the rank of lieutenant colonel. Meanwhile, the single mom of two has spent 32 years working as a high school guidance counselor.

She became an elected official in 2007, when she won a seat on the Town Board in Babylon, N.Y., and has now set her sights on federal office, seeking to unseat veteran Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., in New York’s 2nd Congressional District.

A TV commercial inspired you to join the military. What inspired you to run for office?

I was deployed to Iraq for 14 months, and that caused me to miss the 14th year of my daughter’s life. That’s what made me realize how important our elected officials are, because they make decisions that affect all of us. A lot of people say, ‘I don’t vote because my vote really doesn’t matter.’ That brought it home to me that it

does. So when I came home I decided to be more involved than just voting. I found my local party and said I wanted to get more involved. That’s how it started.

You’ve already been serving in local office. Why do you want to serve in Congress?

Actually, that goes back to the TV commercial. In the military you learn the Army values of selfless service, respect, loyalty, integrity, honor, duty and courage. I was in the military for more than half of my life, so those values are ingrained in me. When I look at what’s happening in Washington, I see a lot

of slippage from those core values. If we elect people who have those core Army values, I think we’ll be in a better place as a nation.

Your military values may translate to Congress, but will your military skills?

The military trains you to always be ready and to be prepared for anything. That focus on how to plan and how to prepare can serve you anywhere. It’s the way I run my life. I know what my end game needs to be, and I plan from there. That’s how I get to my goal. Congress is different, and navigating it is not going to be easy, but the skills I learned in the military have prepared me to get through all manner of rough terrain.



CANDIDATE

**JACKIE
GORDON**

Running for:
U.S. House of
Representatives

Party: Democratic

Home: Copiague, N.Y.

Branch served:
U.S. Army Reserve

Age: 54

PROVIDED BY JACKIE GORDON

As the son of an immigrant and the grandson of refugees — Holocaust survivors who came to the United States after World War II — Dan Helmer might appreciate his country more than most. A West Point graduate who served in the U.S. Army for 11 years and continues to serve in the U.S. Army Reserve, the father of two has always endeavored to serve his country as thanks for welcoming his relatives during their time of need. He hopes to continue doing exactly that representing District 40 in the Virginia House of Delegates.

You ran for Congress in 2018 and lost. What do you think you can achieve in state politics that you couldn’t in federal office?

I’m excited about the opportunity to make positive change quickly in a way that can only be done in our General Assembly in the Commonwealth. And more specifically, I think we deserve a government that fights for our veterans ... I can do that really effectively at the state level.

What’s something that has surprised you about running for office?

Something I didn’t recognize about being involved in politics is how much good you can do for your community just by running for office. For ex-

ample, a woman recently told me that her granddaughter had lost the ability to get her asthma medication because her daughter — the child’s mother — had been erroneously denied Medicare coverage. Because I have been campaigning and have made connections in the community, I was able to help fix the situation and get this little girl asthma medication. Those are the kinds of things you can even do while you’re running.

You have such a compelling family story. What’s it like for your family seeing you serve in this capacity?

My grand-

mother, who is a Holocaust survivor, is still alive. She hid for a year and a half with her family under the baseboards of a basement when Nazis liquidated their village in Poland. They subsequently were declared enemies of the state by the Soviet Union and eventually escaped to our country as refugees. Coming from that, my family knows what this country stands for and has been fighting side by side with me, walking the district with me, helping me collect money, making phone calls, etc. I’m humbled by all the help they have given me, and by the thousands of Virginians who have given up their time and treasure to try to effect real change in our politics.



CANDIDATE

**DAN
HELMER**

Running for: Virginia
House of Delegates

Party: Democratic

Home: Fairfax, Va.

Branch served:
U.S. Army

Age: 38

PROVIDED BY DAN HELMER