



VET VIEWS

on Society and Service



A Pew Research Center survey finds a wide gulf between public and current war veterans on burdens of military service. Yet virtually all vets are proud of their service.

BY THE EDITORS



In the most wide-ranging survey of the attitudes and experiences of war veterans since Louis Harris Associates and the VA released *Myths and Realities* pertaining to Vietnam-era vets in 1980, the views of post-Sept. 11, 2001, veterans have been examined.

And the glaring differences between the veterans and the public on the notion of burden-sharing could not be more pronounced.

The Pew Research Center report, *War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era: The Military-Civilian Gap*, was made public little more than two weeks before the Obama Administration officially announced the end of the Iraq War. The survey queried 712 vets of the current generation (336, or 47%, had actually served in Iraq or Afghanistan), along with a nationally representative sample of earlier war veterans and the general public.

'TROUBLESOME CULTURAL GAP'

Perhaps the most striking finding was that three-fourths (74%) of the American public felt it was perfectly fair and acceptable for armed forces personnel to make all the sacrifices to defend the nation. That is "just part of being in the military," respondents said.

The civic concept of shared sacrifice was vir-

tually absent from the thought process. Former Missouri congressman Ike Skelton called such thinking a "psychological divorce" between the protected and the protectors.

This is "a troublesome cultural gap," as the Associated Press put it. Said one author of the study, Paul Taylor, "They [civilians] recognize that here are burdens borne, and frankly, they don't necessarily want their kith and kin and folks close to them to bear the burdens." Afghanistan vet and Marine Sgt. Jon Moulder put it more bluntly when he told NPR: "We're starting to fall to the wayside. Kind of like the bastard children of our generation."

This cultural divide was most clearly evident in the October decision of the Ivy League Brown University to continue to ban ROTC from its campus. Among other reasons, it cited "opposition to military solutions to world problems" and "the hierarchical approach of the military." *The Boston Globe* pointed out that Brown's reasoning "hints at a broader objection to the military, more cultural



continued on page 19 ►

than political."

Over the past decade, less than one-half of 1% of the population served in a military uniform. Half the public readily admits that the wars have made little difference in their lives. A *USA Today*/Gallup Poll in February 2011 found that the wars had little or no effect whatsoever on almost two-thirds of Americans.

A mere quarter said they followed news of the wars closely, according to Pew. As former secretary of defense Robert Gates once remarked, "For most Americans, the wars remain an abstraction—a distant, unpleasant series of news items that does not affect them personally."

Not surprisingly, "some 84% of post-9/11 veterans say the public does not understand the problems faced by those in the military or their families." Considering the findings of the survey, it is understandable that about 60% of these vets feel they are more patriotic than the populace as a whole.

With a small minority of volunteers bearing the burden, 75% of the public opposes reinstating the military draft. So do more than 80% of current-era veterans.

WORTHINESS OF THE WARS

Half of the Sept. 11-era veterans believe the war in Afghanistan has been "worth fighting." Only 44% of them say the same about Iraq. "Veterans who either experienced or were exposed to casualties are more supportive than other post-9/11 veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan," reported the Pew Research Center.

Some 47% of these vets say they know and served with someone who was killed, and 16% said they themselves were seriously wounded or injured. The greater the sacrifice, the bigger the personal investment one has in the war's outcome.

MATTER OF PRIDE

Though 44% of recent veterans have difficulty adjusting to civilian life, a full 96% are still proud of having served in uniform. And the overwhelming majority gives the armed forces high marks for imparting positive experiences, maturity, interpersonal skills and self-confidence. ★

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