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We Have a Sacred Duty to House all Homeless Veterans

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We Have a Sacred Duty to House all Homeless Veterans

Abstract

In a letter to Congress urging the nation to pay what it owed to veterans of the Continental Army, George Washington voiced his firm conviction that we as honorable Americans would “never leave unpaid the debt of gratitude” to those brave souls who “rescued by their arms from impending ruin” the fledgling United States.
(excerpt)

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We have a sacred duty to house all homeless veterans

By Christopher R. Fee and Joshua L. Stewart, opinion contributors — 11/10/17



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In a letter to Congress urging the nation to pay what it owed to veterans of the Continental Army, George Washington voiced his firm conviction that we as honorable Americans would “never leave unpaid the debt of gratitude” to those brave souls who “rescued by their arms from impending ruin” the fledgling United States.

These words have as much currency today as they did when they were penned by Washington at Newburgh on 18 March 1783. Congress then — as often since — was dragging its feet on perhaps its most sacred obligation: Providing for the welfare of those of its citizens willing to risk the ultimate sacrifice so that their neighbors could sleep secure in their beds.

This is the American social contract at its most basic, spoken with the characteristic decency of a commander who cared about the well-being of men who had served under him honorably and well.

The ensuing years have seen both successes and failures in our attempts to live up to George Washington’s expectations concerning caring for veterans. In the last century alone, for example, we have seen the attack of federal troops upon the Bonus Army, World War I veterans who marched on Washington at the height of the Depression to demand government aid. We saw the

economy-shaping success of the GI Bill just a few years later, We saw the failure of a divided America to care for Vietnam-era veterans, And now new hope of the past few years, which have seen a concerted effort to end veteran homelessness.

Indeed, after decades of ignoring the words of our founding father, we have again begun living up to the ideal in which he believed: With the initiative of the Obama years, we made huge progress in the effort to house all homeless veterans, and now it is up to us to keep up the momentum and not to back down.

According to the best available national data, we had reduced the number of homeless vets to 39,471 by 2016, and only 13,067 of these vets were living on the streets as unsheltered homeless persons. Even one homeless veteran is one too many, but that is a substantial gain. The number of homeless veterans is down 47 percent since 2010, with unsheltered homelessness rates down 57 percent over the same period.

As of 2016, more than 87,000 permanent supportive housing beds had been created for chronically homeless veterans and veterans with families. A growing list of more than 54 municipalities, including Austin, Houston, New Orleans and Philadelphia, and the states of Connecticut, Delaware and Virginia, have declared an end to veteran homelessness within their borders.

The new administration and our current Congress — divided as it may be — must rally behind the troops and continue to support this and similar efforts to do right by veterans.

Elected officials should support initiatives that honor veterans' rights and services, and develop new ones to provide a decent standard of living for all veterans, and live up to the spirit of Washington's words. Congress has been divided and partisan since Washington's day — that is no excuse for failing in this most basic duty.

Private citizens should give time and money to organizations that provide services to homeless vet. Donate as your conscience dictates to those groups that seem best to you, but support them. Even more crucially, hold your elected officials to this promise that we have made as a people to our veterans. Spend five minutes this and every Veterans Day contacting your representatives about these very issues.

As Washington pointed out to Congress more than 200 years ago, now is always the right time for action, now is always the right time to make good on the inviolate compact between the Republic and those of its sons and daughters who lay their lives on the line for our collective security. If we fail in this most sacred obligation, "if, retiring from the field, they are to grow old in poverty, wretchedness, and contempt; if they are to wade through the vile mire of dependency, and owe the miserable remnant of that life to charity, which has hitherto been spent in honor, then," in Washington's words, "shall I learn what ingratitude is...."

Now is the time to house all homeless veterans. It is the smallest step on the road to honor which Washington charts for us.

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<http://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/359439-we-have-a-sacred-duty-to-house-all-homeless-veterans>