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THE UNCERTAIN RETURN:
HOW IS THE 21ST CENTURY VETERAN DOING?

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LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

ROGER CRESSEY

Senior Vice President with Booz Allen Hamilton
Former Member of the United States National
Security Council,

DAWN HALFAKER

Retired Army Captian in Iraq War,
Recipient of the Bronze Star,
Chief Executive Officer and Founder of Halfaker and
Associates

JOE KLEIN

Columnist and Senior Writer, *TIME*.
Author of *The Natural: Bill Clinton's Misunderstood
Presidency*

PAUL RIECKHOFF

Executive Director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans
of America,
Army First Lieutenant and Infantry Rifle Platoon
Leader in Iraq from 2003 to 2004,
Author of *Chasing Ghosts: A Soldier's
Fight for America from Baghdad to Washington*

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P R O C E E D I N G S

(8:00 a.m.)

MR. ALLEN: And welcome to this panel. It's one of the War and Peace track here at Aspen on the "Uncertain Return: How Is the 21st Century Veteran Doing?"

My name is Jon Allen. I'm a senior associate with Booz Allen Hamilton. And as a veteran, it's an honor to introduce this panel. Before I do, I want to thank Joe Klein because last year we were out having a glass of wine, talking about some research Joe was doing on this particular topic and said this would make for a great panel at Aspen. So my warning to you, watch who you talk to during the wine sessions in the afternoons. You may get drafted into a panel for next year. So thank you, Joe, for this.

One housekeeping tip, if you have a cell phone please put it on (inaudible) as it does impact the sound system as we are taping here. I'm going to introduce our moderator and our moderator in turn will introduce our

panel members.

Our moderator Roger Cressey is a senior vice president with Booz Allen Hamilton leading our cyber security and national security business for the Middle East and North Africa. He's had a most impressive career serving at cyber security and counter terrorism positions in both the Clinton and Bush administrations and he is a regular contributor on *NBC* addressing terrorism and counter terrorism issues. So, Roger, thank you for moderating today's panel.

MR. CRESSEY: Absolutely. Jon, thank you and thank you all for coming out at an earlier hour today. This is the type of panel and the type of issue that is so important to our nation and it's a real honor to be able to moderate today. Quickly, I'm going to introduce our panelists and then we are going to get right to it.

On my right is Paul Rieckhoff. Paul is the founder and executive director of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, IAVA, America's first and largest

organization for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. He served as an infantry rifle platoon leader in Iraq and as a nationally recognized authority on the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan. He is also the author of the book, *Chasing Ghosts: A Soldier's Fight for America from Baghdad to Washington*.

Next to Paul is Dawn Halfaker. Dawn is a retired Army captain and a combat-wounded veteran of the war in Iraq. She is a recipient of the Bronze Star and was named by Ernst and Young as one of the Entrepreneurs of the Year in Greater Washington recently. And Dawn is the chief executive officer and founder of Halfaker and Associates. And she joined the Wounded Warrior Project board of directors in 2007 where she now serves as its president.

And at my far right is Joe Klein. And Joe, of course, is a very well known author and commentator, senior writer for *TIME* and a regular on MSNBC's *Morning Joe*. Last year, as Jon said, he talked to Jon about this

issue and he wrote a piece on this very subject entitled *The Next Greatest Generation*, which I encourage you all to read. He has been a very strong advocate for veterans and continues to tour the country talking to veterans. If you read his regular blog *Swampland*, you can see some of his most recent conversations and I highly recommend you take a look at that as well.

So I want to start by citing a couple of statistics from a report that was released by the Center for New American Security this month. Veterans who served after 9/11 are currently unemployed at a higher rate than veterans from prior wars or their civilian peers. The unemployment rate for Post 9/11 veterans is typically at least one full percentage point higher than that for non-veterans.

And unemployment rates for 22- to 24-year-old veterans are on average 3 percent higher than those of non-veterans of the same age and unemployment of veterans in that age group reached a high of almost 22 percent in

2009. We also have some very serious statistics on deaths, on suicides. We are now at the point where troops have died from suicide than have been killed by the enemy. And this is a national level security issue.

So, Paul, let me start with you. When you see where we are, when you take stock of the efforts that the government is doing, what veterans groups like yourself are trying to lead, where are we at, how would you assess the work we have done to this point.

MR. KLEIN: Well, first off thank you for having me and thank you for creating this discussion. I think it's a very important one and I will candidly say I think it's long overdue. Joe has really jumpstarted the conversation especially with the *TIME* cover piece. But we are 10 years in the war. So, candidly, this should have happened a long time ago.

I think we are maybe in the first quarter. You know, a lot of us joined the military and have served sometimes 10 years now. And about a million are going to

get out in the next couple of years. About 2.4 million have served overall. So we have seen a lot of the statistics we have talked about, a spike in unemployment and suicide and family issues.

But we've got decades to go. Vietnam veterans are still dealing with Agent Orange. World War II veterans still receive care at the VA. So part of what, I think, is our responsibility as veterans group to do is to push the horizon out and to push to push the decimal when it comes to cost and to expand the conversation. This is not a check-the-box type situation where we are going to get it over with and it's going to be done. This is going to be one of the biggest public health challenges that our country faces probably in the next couple of decades.

We have been trying to draw comparisons from outside the veterans community. If you think about the national call, the action that happened after 9/11 for all the folks that were impacted or you think about 25 years ago when AIDS hit the United States, you know, there have

been these kind of tectonic shifts in our health care, in our politics, in our society. So we are very, very early in the game. And what I do want to tell you is that the trend line is going in the wrong direction.

That statistic about unemployment is arguable. We see about 17 percent in our membership and there is not a lot of good data in research. So if it comes to data, metrics for efficacy, service programs and how good they are, scope and scale, we are very, very early I think in what would be a really generational challenge.

MR. CRESSEY: Dawn, how about your perspective?

MS. HALFAKER: Sure, yeah, thank you. And again, thank you for having me. It's an honor to be here. Yeah, I mean I have to agree with Paul. I think that we are really just starting to wake up to what the real impact of this war is going to be and what the real issues are. I mean we have talked about unemployment. You know, the veterans that are going to be coming back, they are facing a very -- an uncertain climate. I mean, they are

worried about where am I going to get my -- you know, am I going to have a job, am I going to have medical care.

As they make the transition out, they are faced with all these very, very real issues. And the question is what are we doing, are the programs that we kind of already have going, are they enough. And, you know, like Paul said, we are -- the trend line is going in the wrong direction. I think that you see kind of the big areas in mental health, that we don't have a solution for the mental health crisis that's going on. And I think that unemployment, suicide rates, things like that are really symptoms of a real problem that we just don't know how to solve yet.

So while I think that there's a lot going on, it's not enough. And I think that we also sort of have a resource allocation problem where a lot of folks say they see a veteran and, you know, in my case, I am wounded, so people will see me and they will say, oh, wow, she's missing an arm, I want to help her. And it's like, well,

I've already been helped. I don't need help. I have a job.

But you know what, the care and the resources are really frontloaded. And I think that's another issue. You know, we kind of just need to take a look at is how are we going to help these veterans 10 years, 20 years down the line? Like Paul mentioned, I mean, the generations before us, they don't just suddenly get better.

The war for them begins when they return home and it really never ends. And I just think that that's what, from my organization's perspective, Wounded Warrior Project, that's what we are really trying to do, is we're really trying to advocate for this generation of veterans to make sure that they are the most well-adjusted generation of veterans in our nation's history. So it's kind of where I'm coming from.

MR. CRESSEY: So Joe, you have been a great advocate for veterans. Based on what you've seen or what you've reported, how do you take stock from your

perspective and position in the media?

MR. KLEIN: Well, I'd like to come at it from a slightly different perspective and maybe address my fellow civilians. I wouldn't be up here if I hadn't been over there with our troops, embedding with them and seeing what they did. And what I learned over there by watching them is that this generation of veterans are coming back with problems, that's for sure, but they are coming back with solutions.

In fact, they may be a very big solution for our country because they not only have a very solid core of values and a can-do, let's-get-the-mission-done-spirit, which is sorely lacking in our public life, but they've actually had to do governance over there. Because of counterinsurgency, which is all about protecting the people, these troops have had to be, I've watch captains and Iraq and their sergeants, be the government in these towns. They have money for public works, CERP funds. They find out what the people need. They sell it to the

local town council. They do this under tremendous security pressure. And if they can do it over there, they can certainly do it over here, right?

I think that they are going to be the next great generation of American political leaders. And so when I hear about the problems that Paul and Dawn have talked about and when I go out and see people who have those problems and then I see the reaction in the government and other sectors, it's very -- it's really infuriating.

You know, they are 1 percent of the population. We don't know them very well. Most Americans don't know what they did over there. And it's important for us to understand that these guys are not a problem. They have problems, but they are a potential -- potentially really important solution for us.

MR. CRESSEY: So let's talk a little bit about the government. How is the government doing? You know, as a former civil servant, by and large people in the government want to do the right thing as an individual.

Collectively, they often fall short because of bureaucracy and a whole host of other reasons.

When you look at what the Veterans Affairs Department is doing, some of the other initiatives that are going on in government, where do you see it right now? Again, we know there is a lot more they need to do. Talk a little about the challenges but also talk a little bit about what they have done right to this point.

MR. RIECKHOFF: For Joe or me?

MR. CRESSEY: I am going to start with you, Paul.

MR. RIECKHOFF: Government is, as we call, are flat-footed. And when we ask our members how they are doing, overwhelmingly they say pretty damn bad. And I think the important thing -- nobody in this country is particularly happy with government right now, but especially folks who've been sacrificing for last 10 years and I think I have an expectation that their contract with America will be upheld. "You go to war. If you get messed up, we are going to care of you." That's the kind

of moral contract we enter into with these folks.

And the most regular interaction they have with the government outside of screaming at the television like every one else is the VA. And the VA has just been a total disappointment, especially in the last couple of years. The disability claims backlog is over 800,000. If you go and file a disability claim right now with the VA, your average wait time is 6 months. Six months. If you appeal, it resets to 2 years.

A recent IG report, unfortunately it didn't get a lot of national attention, but really kind of validated what our membership has been crying for, for years, which is accountability and the recognition that right now the VA doesn't even have data that we can trust. The IG report said that VA data was useless when it came to wait times. And the epicenter of this was Oakland, California, where if you walked in for a mental health appointment, you had to wait 300 days. So that's the bottom line, folks.

If you do step forward and say you need help and you have to wait that long, it's unacceptable. So I think there has been a real lack of accountability. I think Secretary Shinseki has got a pass. Most of you don't even know that he is the secretary of the VA until I just said that. And I think the president has got to be aggressive. Both sides have got to be aggressive and recognize it.

We kind of -- it took us a long while to realize that we really weren't prepared for Iraq. It shouldn't take us that long to realize we are not prepared for when they come home. But that's where we are right now. A lot of congressional action has helped the GI bill. I guess, I would pull it up as one of the greatest successes. That has now educated about half a million veterans.

This year is the first year they really graduated and went through the 4 years. And I think Joe is right. We are going to be a generation of leaders we hope will inspire the entire country, not just our population. At the end of the day, we are not a charity.

We are an investment.

And I think that the GI bill is one of the greatest government investments in history. But we've got to recognize it. It doesn't matter what folks in Washington tell you. Get out in the streets and ask veterans and they will tell you what's really going on and right now they are very disappointed.

MR. KLEIN: You know, I --

MR. RIECKHOFF: And one more thing I want to add. Sorry for good. Only 51 percent of them are even using the VA. So there is an outreach problem as well. That's only of the folks that have actually used the VA. So this is our generation, Iraq and Afghanistan. Just over half are using the VA. So there's also -- that's a very small set of the potential that could be actually taking advantage of the services.

MR. CRESSEY: Joe.

MR. KLEIN: You know, there is a certain irony here in that you have this generation of potential

leaders, people who are going to go back into their communities and become the super citizens. And they -- and the agency that deals with them most directly, the VA, doesn't have a super leader advocating for them. I mean, when was the last time any of you saw Shinseki on TV?

You know, I was kind of holding my fire until I was just out on my annual road trip and in Dayton, Ohio, I met a woman whose son had received a honorable medical discharge from the military. And it had taken him 18 months to get his first disability payment because they lost the papers and then there was all the rigmarole to go. You go to the back in the line and so on.

And I can't tell you how many stories like that I've heard. But at a certain point, you have to be accountable. There is some wonderful things going on in the administration for veterans. I mean, the First Lady and Joe Biden's efforts are certainly notable. But when a sergeant in Afghanistan goes berserk and kills 16 people, that splashes all over the kids who've come home.

And you need to have a passionate advocate in the job of secretary of Veterans Affairs to be out on the TV the next day and say, yeah, I know that happened but let me tell you about -- let me tell about Dawn and let me tell you about Paul. And we don't have that now. And it really it's not -- it's very troublesome and I think it's not a good thing for the administration, and I think it could be exploited politically against.

MR. CRESSEY: So, Dawn, we've heard about accountability and the need for more. We heard about leadership and the need for more. From your position at the Wounded Warrior Project, do you see the same thing and do you see other steps that could be taken to address both the accountability and leadership deficit right now?

MS. HALFAKER: Yeah. You know, I agree with both Paul and Joe. And I think that what we've really seen is senior leaders just not being held accountable. I know, and an example is our organization Wounded Warrior Project and I think IAVA was on board with us too, was

really pushing for some caregiver legislation.

And what caregiver -- the caregiver bill was it was a bill to -- for Congress to change the law to allow the VA to provide training, medical care and small stipend and compensation to families, moms, dads, sisters, brothers, who had to care for a severally injured veteran. And again, these are veterans that with traumatic brain injuries, polytrauma, cannot function on their own.

So this is a very small yet very important branch of population that we are obligated to take care of. And rather than throw them off in an institution, you know, these are combat veterans that want to be -- their families want to be -- they want to take care of them and they ought to.

And so this is an example where Congress, you know, the legislation passed, president signed the bill and then it was given to the VA to implement. You know what? And the VA dropped the ball, okay? And it's organizations like IAVA, Wounded Warrior Project, folks

like Joe that are the ones saying, hey, look, you know -- basically, the last thing the VA is saying what are you doing, you know, why can't you not get this right?

You know, so I just -- I don't understand why senior leaders are not being held accountable in those situations. You know, Congress has all the authority to hold them accountable and they don't for as much as they are trying to do for veterans. So that's an example of where we are coming from.

So, you know, you asked what more can be done. You know, I think that that's where our organizations, the non profits, are forced to kind of fill the gaps. So I know that Wounded Warrior Project is really taken -- part of our charter is caregivers and really looking out for them and kind of helping with their needs and just looking at all the things that we can do, running programs, retreats, offering training.

So there's just -- there is just a lot of things that can be done there. But I just think that this is

where the non profits have to step up. But I just think that until senior leaders are held accountable, nothing is really going to change.

MR. CRESSEY: So why did the VA drop the ball? I mean their -- it was just a lack of attention? Was it just the classic bureaucratic issue of once it's handed to them, then no one really takes ownership of it inside the organization? I mean, there's -- there are very few issues in the United States that people are in agreement on and one of them, because of all of the press coverage, is to support the veterans. I mean, the platitudes were always out there. And one of the things we want to talk about is how to get pass the platitudes. But, you know, why is the VA falling so short on this?

MR. RIECKHOFF: I think a lot of it has to do with culture. I mean the VA is an example of a system that really hasn't been forced to innovate in 30 years, right? I mean, a wave of veterans hasn't come home since Vietnam. So in 2004, you had, for example, 15 percent

women. So you had VA hospitals at women's bathrooms, okay? You have an entire culture that hasn't been updated to take into account traumatic brain injury and the prevalence of post traumatic stress disorder. It's largely still a paper based system. I mean, the entire bureaucracy is just caught years behind.

And the biggest challenge that Secretary Shinseki has had is to transform that culture. And you've got some deeply entrenched bureaucrats. I think the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees have not been aggressive enough in their oversight and in their accountability. But there is an important point here too. Every one here needs to know, and it's great that it's an influential audience like Aspen, the government does not have this covered, okay?

A lot of folks think you come home and you get some kind of gold card and you go into the VA and everything is good to go. The VA does not have this covered. And that's part of the problem that I have with

messaging coming out of Washington is kind of don't worry about it, we got it. And joining forces is a welcome initiative, but it's not a focused call to action. And what we need right now, for example, are qualified mental health care workers.

We've got a suicide problem. We don't have enough qualified mental health care workers. General Chiarelli who was leading the suicide prevention task force at the Pentagon, every month he would say, here the suicide numbers and here is what I need. That never got out. So really leaders in Washington have to stand up and say, hey, you really want to support the vets? Step up and become a qualified mental health care worker and come at the VA, come work at the DOD. Get on the frontlines of a different fight.

So I think we have to appreciate that the VA is a spoke on the wheel and it's going to have to require, in the short term especially, private citizens, local non-profits, community groups, veterans groups. It's going to

require you all to help. And a friend of mine, Aaron Menken (phonetic), said recently, if you can't serve over there, serve them. This should be a national call to action. And it is not charity. This is an investment. If you invest in people like Dawn and Zach McDonald in front row who was in the 82nd Airborne, if you invest in this young men and women, they will be a generation of leaders.

They will help inspire our economy. They will lead us on national defense and politics, all these other issues in the community level. We see them doing great things and education, in the green space. But we've got to invest now. We've got to recognize that this is the time. The next couple of years are critical before the country's attention moves on to something else.

MR. CRESSEY: Joe?

MR. KLEIN: You know, I want to take this from the abstract to individual stories to show you -- I mean, I talked to Paul all the time, I've just met Dawn, but the

frustration that Paul is dealing with is very real. There are a lot of people who want to try and do things and there are a lot of great ideas out there, but there is this black hole. You know, I have talked to -- you know, Admiral Mullen was in charge of the Joint Chiefs, I gave him a couple of ideas. That's great, let's do it. And nothing ever gets done. It doesn't happen.

But let me tell you the story of Captain Jeremiah Ellis who I embedded with in the town of Senjaray in Afghanistan and his -- he was 4th Infantry Division and his company had had a very rough deployment. It was an 80 percent Taliban controlled area. You know, there are people who have been lost, but also the nature of it. It was just -- it seemed that they were losing ground continually, and he was really worried about his troops.

When -- what would happen when they came back. And he had about 10 days to 2 weeks before they went to see their families. And you know the stories of about what happens when soldiers come home to their families,

bad things, especially after a frustrating deployment, bad things happens.

So Jeremiah Ellis had a degree in experiential therapy from the University of New Hampshire. And what he decided to do was put together an outward bound experience for his entire company. He got some of the experiential therapy faculty from the University of New Hampshire. He got the shrinks from Fort Carlson, which is where they were coming to. He took them out for 3 days and they did rock climbing and whitewater races and all kinds of -- and you know, soldiers kind of love danger, you know, that there is a rush to it.

And when the endorphin start going, it's easier for people to talk about their problems. And that's where the shrinks and the experiential therapists came in. And, you know, he got his troops through their homecoming. And everybody thinks that this is a great idea. This is one of the ideas I gave to Admiral Mullen. Nothing has happened yet. There are many ideas like this. I mean,

Paul and Dawn can go from dawn to dusk telling about great ideas that these kids who were coming home have to help heal each other, but it ain't happening for some reason.

MR. CRESSEY: So, Dawn, there -- we talked about assimilation, re-assimilation, reintegration into society. For visible wounds, I think there is one perspective that people have. But we have talked about there's a lot of folks coming back with non-visible wounds. And how do you take the steps necessary to help those folks? Is enough attention being paid to that in part of this broader debate, broader discussion?

MS. HALFAKER: Yeah, and I think that that's a great question kind of looking at the two, you know, if you want to call them, two different categories. I mean, obviously, when people see me, they can identify with what's going on, she is missing an arm. Well, she -- you know, that was probably very painful, and now she struggles to just use one arm the rest of her life.

What they don't see is what's going on in my head and what's going on in some of the other veteran's heads, the -- I don't know if they have any statistics out right now, what the latest numbers are, estimates, on how many veterans that are coming back have post traumatic stress. It's something very real. It's something our membership is certainly plagued with the most.

And there -- that's really where the least is known about exactly what's going on, what therapies are going to work. And then also the resources that are out there. I mean, Paul already mentioned that there is not enough mental health care providers in the VA network, and again, I don't want this panel to become this kind of just trashing the VA.

But I mean, for example, the wait times to get a mental health appointment are probably close to 3 to 6 months. And then when you get an appointment, they just -- you know, they want to tell you what's wrong with you, put you on some drugs and just hopefully hope that you go

away. And that's not going to solve. I mean, as Joe pointed out, we are dealing with the most well educated and professional military force that we've ever had. It's a very, very small percentage of the population. So there are resources out there that we can bring to bear.

And I think one of the things Wounded Warrior Project is really looking at is we are looking at providing mental health care coverage for our returning veterans, and we are doing that. One thing that we really haven't mentioned here is the private sector corporations. We are doing that by partnering with corporations that are able to -- you know, the huge managed care companies out there that have these provider networks that are just, you know, they are huge and partnering with them to bring their resources to bear.

There is other non-profits that have started out. There is one called Give an Hour where clinicians can donate their time and a warrior can sign up and they -- or a veteran, it doesn't have to be a wounded warrior, can

sign up and they can access that care for free and they can go and see this mental health provider that's volunteered their time. And it's really kind of a good relationship.

So there are examples of things that are out there that are going on. But it's not enough. It's not -- in my opinion, it's not consolidated enough in terms of clear leadership. It's part of black hole Joe mentioned. There's this all this stuff going on. Veterans don't know about it and it's just kind of getting off the ground. Like I said we're just waking up.

MR. CRESSEY: So let's change the conversation now. Let's go from where -- how we see the problem and assess it to what are we going to do about it and what can we do?

MR. KLEIN: You know, there are things that could be done almost immediately. I mentioned this in this room a couple of days ago. General Chiarelli, who is retired now, told me about it. There are drugs for

traumatic brain injury that are potentially very useful. And they are just stalled in the Food and Drug Administration because the Food and Drug Administration is the Food and Drug Administration, right?

And I think that if you had somebody, an ombudsmen, a leader dealing with these problems you could say to the Food and Drug Administration let's have a pilot program for any member of the military who has sustained a traumatic brain injury to try these drugs. And then we'll see whether -- you know, I'm sure that these guys will be willing and the people I've met who have suffered traumatic brain -- it's very -- it can be very upsetting. I'm sure they would be willing to do that.

Another thing, Paul and I were talking about before, is that you have all of these skilled workers in the military. You have truck drivers, you have welders, you have electricians, you have tech people, you have medics. And when they come out, they have to go through a really complicated process of getting certified or

licensed in each of the individual states.

And what we could do right off the top, and I know that the administration is working on this, but not fast enough, you could have a military certification of skill that the governors would accept as an immediate licensing. If you want to be a truck driver in Ohio where they need a lot of them because the auto industry is revived, it takes 6 months to get licensed and it costs you \$10,000. And if -- you know, there are an awful lot of military truck drivers, people who have chauffeured me around, who can do this under fire. They could certainly do the interstate. And --

MR. CRESSEY: I-95 is a little bit of a free-fire zone these days.

(Laughter)

MR. KLEIN: But if we could expedite -- and there is also an awful lot of truck drivers baby boomers who are retiring. If we could expedite this and really move on in quickly, it would make coming home a lot easier

for people who are worried how they are going to have -- how they are going to apply their skill, how are they going to get -- raised the \$10,000 to do it. There are a whole bunch of things like this. And I think that the frustration of Paul and Dawn and me, standing on the sidelines, is that there is no one there to push it ahead.

MR. CRESSEY: So we look at certifying veterans before they discharge, great step to help with their reintegration and to get them employed at the community level. Paul, and we have talked about it, right, federal government is not going to solve this for a variety of reasons. So it's got to be the center of gravity here is community, it's corporations, it's NGOs and it's individuals. What do you think for organization at the community level that is working and what do we need to do more of?

MR. RIECKHOFF: Well, I want to answer both of those questions at the same time. So I do a lot of panels where we sit around and re-identify the problems. A lot

of the problems that we are presenting to you we were presenting to groups like you 5 years ago. We got to get towards solutions. And we are turning that frustration into motivation and we are going to solve our own problems just like we did in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The old adage in the infantry is adapt, improvise and overcome. And as an organization, the largest organization of Iraq's vets in the country or Iraq and Afghanistan vets in the country, we can't afford to wait around any longer. So we are moving forward. And people ask me what can you do. Here is a really simple thing. Support the best-in-class non-profit organization that exist already, period.

Don't reinvent the wheel. Groups like ours have been working in this space, some of us for 10 years, 8 years, 5 years. A best in class has emerged, okay, and they desperately need support. Most of them were living hand-to-mouth and they are seeing the demand on their programs skyrocket. The demand on our programs are pretty

much tripling.

So for us the secret recipe for veterans doing well in this generation is a model that we call HEEK. We love acronyms in the military. So it's health, education, employment and community. If you tackle those four things together -- but the last part community being the most important part. The biggest thing that IAVA does is bring veterans together, connect them with each other and connect them with resources. So it's 350 events a year, but it's also online resources.

And we've got to help cut through the clutter because even in this conversation you here a lot of different things. So the veterans don't know where to go; you don't know where to go. So I actually give Mullen some credit because he has been leading now. He is out of the military when he was really restricted. DOD will tell you and Mullen will tell you, they kind of hand you to the edge and then it is somebody else's challenge. And that's where the VA and the country really steps up.

So I just want to give you one short comparison. I talk about the AIDS analogy a lot because 25 years ago AIDS hit this country. It was a massive public health challenge. Most of the country didn't feel it. There was no research. There was no metrics for efficacy when it came to programs. Most of the existing non-profits hadn't adapted. Corporations really weren't involved yet, and there was no philanthropy. There was no market for good ideas that could be taken to scale.

That's where we are now. And also folks thought AIDS was a gay problem, okay? This are the same challenges we are facing now. Even the research, we can't tell you what the exact suicide rate because nobody knows. We need research. We need metrics for evaluation around services.

And we need the best in class that are doing good work. What I see at the community level is a lot of great groups that can get the scale. So there is this tremendous innovation coming out of this generation. I

have called them at times the innovation generation. But there is no market place for their ideas.

So what we need is investment. We need the American public to step up and say we are going to create a platform where these good ideas, if this young vet comes up with a nonprofit, that it's doing good work, how does he get that to a national level. It doesn't exist right now.

And philanthropy is one area that I think needs to step up. We are getting a lot of \$10,000, \$50,000 donations. We need to move the decimal point to get into the millions and tens of millions because these problems are hard, they are complicated and they are expensive, very expensive. So we've really got to understand that we got to move the decimal point on all of our solutions here and really try to consolidate. And I think Admiral Mullen and people like that General Kristal (phonetic) is here, they are going to lead again in a way that's really necessary.

MR. CRESSEY: You know, Paul, you talk about using the AIDS analogy. AIDS didn't become an issue for the mainstream media and most of America until Magic Johnson.

MR. RIECKHOFF: Right.

MR. CRESSEY: Right? That fundamentally changed the AIDS debate. Are we going to need a Magic Johnson-like event in order for people to basically get off the schneid and try to do what they should be doing?

MR. RIECKHOFF: You know, I think so. There have been these little bumps. I mean, when Pat Tillman was killed. That was a really important time for the country because everybody felt like they knew Pat Tillman.

MR. CRESSEY: Right.

MR. RIECKHOFF: Unfortunately, it's been when Sergeant Bales shoot civilians, allegedly shoots civilians overseas, that I thought was going to be the call to action, I thought it was going to be the wake up call. It went wall to wall, press, all of us were talking about

this, and in a constant we're down again.

So how do we sustain that motivation? I don't know. I hope it's not a catastrophic event. I hope it's something else. I think it honestly will be leaders like us that take it on and start to move it forward. But right now I don't know.

MR. KLEIN: You know the -- Paul and I have talked about this recently, especially after the Sergeant Bales thing. You know, you have all these yellow ribbons out there and "thank you for your service" has become almost become an in-joke among veterans. You know, thank you for your service but I'm not going to hire you because you might shoot up my office.

And I think that it's really important to understand that when you are meeting veterans, "thank you for your service" isn't enough. It's what did you do over there? What was it like? What did you learn? What skills do you have? And trying to find the point of common humanity, maybe you could do something for someone

who has come over with some real skill, come back with some real skills.

But these people did remarkable things for us and most of them believed that we don't care at all about them. I mean, I can tell you that stories about veterans, tank -- you know, my cover story about this amazing generation was one of the worst sellers in *TIME* magazine last year. Movies about these wars, books about these wars, people don't want to hear about it. And it's unfortunate because what they are missing are young people with the qualities that this country most needs right now.

MR. CRESSEY: So, Dawn, we've talked over the past couple of days, the workforce here, it's highly educative, it's entrepreneurial for the reasons that Joe talked about, what they did in the field, how they had to get things done. Professional at a level unlike probably any returning class of veterans we've seen in our history. How do we take that professional workforce and focus efforts to try and get them employed?

MS. HALFAKER: Right, yeah, and I think that that's really what I think the benefit is. As Joe talks about, you know this generation really does have the potential. I mean, they are the future leaders. But if the American people don't decide that they are going to be the ones, you know, Paul said, well, you know I don't know how we solve this problem and I don't know if it's one celebrity that needs to tweet about it.

But the bottom line is the American people need to solve the problem and they need to wake up and they need to realize that it's less than 1 percent that sign up, that sign a blank check to the United States of America up to including life. And they don't sign up to go to war in Iraq. They sign up to protect the American way of life. So regardless of kind of where the politics lie in this, I mean, that's, in my opinion, that's how we solve this as we do it by Americans pitching in.

But going back to your question of well how do we know make sure that we capture this great generation

and we make sure they don't slip through the cracks and, you know, we get the suicide rates down, I think what we really need to do is we need to engage them, especially as they are transitioning. And that's an area that we haven't really touched on specifically yet this morning.

But it's -- I think Paul mentioned it. DOD just kind of -- you know, they do a good job and then -- but once you are out the door, it's don't look back because we are focused on the wars, we are focused on the folks that are currently serving. So there is that transition of, you know, I'm taking off the uniform, I'm resigning my commission, whatever it is, I'm being medically retired, I'm coming out of the service and now I'm a veteran, what do I do and what's out there?

And that's where I think the transition is so important. And there is some things that the military are doing in conjunction with the VA, in conjunction with Department of Labor, but the bottom line is I think that is if organizations, your non-profits, but basically

corporate America really decides that these are the people that are going to be the future leaders not only in politics, but in business and they are good for the bottom line for some of the reasons that Roger already mentioned. They are smart, they are smart, they are adaptable, they are entrepreneurial, they are emotionally intelligent.

Joe mentioned the situations that these folks are faced with, they were faced when we were over there. You know, I mean, we are making decisions with people's lives. At 24 years old, I was leading a platoon. I was in combat and I was responsible for 30, 32 other soldiers' lives. I mean, that's a lot of responsibility.

My platoon medic, she was 21 years old. She saved my life, pulled me out of a truck, triaged my injuries, got me to the next level of care. She cannot get a nursing job in this country, okay? I mean, it's just we need to reach out to these folks and we need to make sure --

MR. KLEIN: That's why the certification and licensing is so important.

MS. HALFAKER: Absolutely, absolutely.

MR. RIECKHOFF: And I think the country cares. I know the country cares. Admiral Mullens talk very effectively about the sea of goodwill. The problem is that sea of goodwill is like an aquifer that's kind of bubbling underneath and nobody has driven a spike into it to tap it, got it?

President Bush never asked anybody to do anything. President Obama really hasn't been focused in asking everyone to do anything. Taxes haven't gone up. There hasn't been a national call to action. There is Jerry Lewis telethon for vets. So I think there has to be a focus call to action.

MR. CRESSEY: Whose job is that?

MR. RIECKHOFF: I think it's the president's. I think it's the president's, but I think it's all of our job. Just like everything else in this country, if we sit

around and wait for Washington to fix it. You are going to be waiting a while. But I think it's up to all of us. This should be a issue, a centerpiece issue, for the presidential election. Both candidates should be talking about this issue because it's about the soul of our country. It's a national security issue. It's an economic issue. And if you can't get this right, we're in big trouble.

MR. CRESSEY: Right.

MR. RIECKHOFF: Because this should be the bipartisan thing. This should be the obvious thing for us to get right.

MR. KLEIN: Can I just, once again, emphasize the irony of this? When you see these troops out in the field and they are faced with really impossible situations, real road blocks, they don't just steer their gear and go home. They figure out ways to get around the road block. And when I watch them do this -- I mean, I was in a combat headquarters in Baqubah, which is where

Dawn was injured, and it was in the middle of a pretty big battle there and the captains were coming back and saying, hey, they are telling us where the bad guys are. Let's change our plan and do it this way.

And it's always like that. They are always -- they are obsessed with getting the mission accomplished. And here they come to a situation where there is a real mission for us as a public and there isn't any of the kind of creativity and passion and intellectual rigor brought to this problem that they brought to the problems that they faced overseas.

MR. CRESSEY: So I want to get to questions and I think what Joe and Dawn and Paul all highlight is that for a long time we discussed that we were not a nation at work. There were communities at work. And now that we have the veterans back, what are we going to do? Is it just going to be communities that are going to deal with the returning veterans or as a nation are we going to do something. So, questions, please.

Right here, sir.

MR. NEVINS: Yeah, I have a question for Joe.

MR. CRESSEY: Can you identify yourself?

MR. NEVINS: David Nevins (phonetic), Pennsylvania and Florida. We talked earlier, Joe, the certification concept. It seems like a no-brainer. I don't quite understand the lobbying process to get it done. Is it lobbying Congressmen to get it done or lobbying someone in the military to get it done? I mean, why -- no one is against it I assume. So who would you lobby to have it happen and to have it happen now?

MR. KLEIN: Well, I'm going to turn this to Paul who knows more about it than I do. But I suspect you got to have the 50 governors at the next National Governors Association meeting, pass a resolution saying we will accept military certification and licensing of skilled trades people. And then you got to convince the military to issue the certifications in, you know, as they are transitioning their troops out.

MR. RIECKHOFF: We've got to make Fort Bragg like Harvard, okay? If you go to Fort Bragg, you should be able to have all the greatest employers just teaming, looking for these folks, waiting for them to come off the parade field. But I think that's right. And right here from the First Lady's Office -- and they do deserve credit. I think what the first lady has done, and Joining Forces has done, has jumpstarted a conversation. That is very important, especially in the corporate sector and at community levels.

That is very important, and it should be applauded. But it still got to -- it's got to take it to the next level to action, clear action, and you all have to got to get involved. But it is focused on the governors. You know, it becomes a local issue. It varies by state. I think Roger told me earlier they've got like 24 or so on board, is that right?

SPEAKER: That's correct.

MR. RIECKHOFF: Yeah. And so we got to get 50, but we should've been there 10 years ago. This is a no-brainer. If you are combat medic, you should go right in to being an EMT. Make the certification happen. And I think we are seeing that at the community level.

To your point. I was in New York recently for an event put on Robin Hood, a local poverty fighting organization in New York City. They had everybody there. I mean it was Admiral Mullen and it was CEOs. And there was a conversation on how to deal with veterans in the New York area. There is a happening in Chicago. They are happening in Houston. They are happening in San Diego. And I think those are starting to create a localized blue print that can be a model for national application.

So I think we've seen that. Especially, governors and mayors, there are some that have really stepped up. And I think they see it right now. They are feeling it the hardest and I think that's where we will see some --

MR. CRESSEY: Highlighting that --

MR. KLEIN: Paul is right. You need national leadership for this. You need the President of the United States to go to the next meeting of the National Governors Association and say, guys, women, friends, let's get this done. Yesterday --

And by the way, I just want to say that I wasn't being critical of Admiral Mullen because I know I'm a big fan of him as well. He really loves the troops and he really worked hard as a Navy guy to understand what the ground troops were going through. I was out there with him. But, you know, the fact is that he was pretty frustrated when he was chairman of the Joint Chiefs as well about this issue.

MR. CRESSEY: Question right here.

MR. KANENLY: Hi.

MR. CRESSEY: You are on.

MR. KANENLY: Hi, Chris Kanenly. I am working with Suicide Prevention for about 10 years. I launched

the Veterans Crisis Line and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. So I've worked, you know, pretty closely with VA, with SAMHSA, on a lot of these issues. And since we launched the Veterans Crisis Line, we were able to -- we've increased call line to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, like it's tripled from veterans. So we know the people are using the service. I know it's absolutely not enough. I work in the private sector. I'm not -- I don't work for the VA.

So I'm trying to think from a suicide prevention standpoint in kind of knowing a lot of the people and players in the field, it seem like having a summit of some sort where we get together, you know, the best minds like you guys and then the people in the suicide prevention community and people in the private sector and really get creative about a lot of these, you know, a lot of the needs because you mentioned a host of needs.

MR. CRESSEY: Yeah.

MR. KANENLY: And I think that you are right, absolutely right. Here is a lot of creativity. I have seen a lot of creativity. I have talked to a lot of vets that are just doing so much in their community, but it has to be risen to the next level and hope you guys do that.

MR. RIECKHOFF: And this guy and his team are real national heroes too. There are a lot of folks who are fighting on these frontlines everyday. In the Veterans Crisis Line, we've a partnership with and we send vets to them on a regular basis. That, I believe, was only started in 2008 after the Joshua Omvig legislation went through and we pushed for this Veterans Crisis Line which does literally life-saving work.

That is something that should be applauded. It's a solution that is an innovative solution that's come out of the VA that should be replicated and should be celebrated. But a lot of vets don't know about it. We don't have our "It gets better" campaign, right? There hasn't been a national galvanization of everything around

veteran suicide. It needs to happen. We are losing more veterans to suicide than to combat. Those are just the ones we know. There is no tracking mechanism.

So I'm out of the military now. If Dawn is out of the military, if we commit suicide, we don't get counted. So there is no way right now to really even assess the scope of the problem. But I think, you know, that's a great program. If you can help this guy promote the Veterans Crisis Line, you are here at Aspen, find him afterward because it is literally saving lives every single day.

MR. CRESSEY: We have time for one more question. Yes, ma'am.

MS. VAN DE PUTTE: Hi, Leticia Van de Putte. I'm state senator in San Antonio, Texas, and I chair the Veteran Affairs and Military Installations Committee. Part of the work, I think, of the National Conference of State Legislatures that gotten the task force to do expedited licensing, also a program called College Credit

for Heroes, taking that training that DOD has given Antonio and turning it into college credit so that it gives them a jumpstart.

But my real question is our unbelievable problem with the mental health side. The stats just for my state is that vets make up about 8 percent of my Texas population, higher because of our 17 military installations, about 1.8 million vets. But they make up 22 percent of the suicides. And that we know from going to records.

Our problem has been -- is that our warrior community is not a whining community. They don't say I need help. And so how would you suggest because we've tried that. It just is not working. How do we as a community or families get the vet the help because they are not going to cry out and say, hey, I have issues. And that's what we have found. What would you recommend?

MR. KLEIN: Can I ask Paul and Dawn a question? As we know this generation aren't going to the American

Legion or the VFW, places where prior generations were able to find the camaraderie, you know, to get them through the rough times. How do we -- what's the best way to set up a network of not vet centers where everything is therapeutic, but places where veterans from this generation can get together and just talk about how stupid civilian society is or whatever or sports or, you know --

MR. RIECKHOFF: Now, thank you for the lay out. It's Wounded Warrior Project-IAVA, okay, and others. They don't go to the VFW and the American Legion the same way they used to. That model is not working for this generation. Our average member is 27 years old. It's Facebook. It's social media. It's -- what we know helps prevent and stop suicide is hope and connection.

That's the first part. They have got to know that someone understands where they are coming from, understands how to overcome the stigma. And people come to IAVA events because they want to be around other veterans. They come to a baseball game, they come to a

community service day, and then they find out about the programs and that becomes the on-ramp.

So what we really need, on a very basic level, is on-ramps into a community in whatever way, shape or form, and those can be created but it is always driven by vet-to-vet peer-to-peer counselors because they are not going to talk to the average civilian about those issues. And it's got to be sometimes kind of a bank shot. I can't hold an event that's PTSD day, come on out.

But if I say, hey, we are going to have 500 vets at Dodgers Stadium for July 4th, come on out and we will have resources there, we get tremendous results. And I think those are the types of breakthroughs we've seen at IAVA that can really, really be taken to scale and technology is the fuel injection for all of it.

MR. CRESSEY: And that's where communities and corporations can really make a difference. Fortunately, we could talk about this and we should talk about it much more. So we are going to have to end here. One point for

all of you to remember as you walk down the path, you see quotes from famous Americans. There is a great quote from Shirley Chisholm, but that's not the one I want to talk about. She once said service is the rent we pay for room on this earth. Service is the rent we pay for room on this earth.

So our veterans have served. They have paid the rent. So if that's the case, that makes all of us the landlords. So we have a responsibility and obligation as the landlords of those who have served and paid the rent to take care of them. So as you think about how you are going to fulfill your obligation and your responsibility going forward, please join me in thanking Paul, Dawn and Joe for a fantastic conversation.

(Applause)

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