

# Repaying the Burden

## Scholarships for military families

by **Bob Okun** – a *Washington Times* op-ed, Thursday 8/2/2007

The United States is a country that has been at war for nearly five years, yet for the vast majority of Americans we have gone on with our lives with minimal interruption. The reason, in part, is that we are fighting an intensive, protracted two-front war with an all-volunteer force. And it is the first time in modern history that the majority of Americans have experienced a military conflict of this scale with such a non-scripted force.

Since September 11, we have been “inconvenienced” with color-coded alerts and long security lines at airports, and we have been deeply disturbed by graphic TV news reports detailing the human loss and suffering in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet, a relatively small slice of American society, myself included, has any real connection to the brave men and women in uniform protecting our freedoms every day. And fewer still have any idea what these heroes’ families are going through as they wait for their service members to come home.

Our nation’s leaders have never been so distanced before, with fewer having served or having family members that serve, than ever before. We as citizens content ourselves with the fact that we’ve contributed to a care package or applauded someone in uniform, but with so little asked of us from a personal commitment, it is our responsibility, our obligation, to close this distance and rally around those whose loved ones sacrifice their time, their safety and even their lives for our country.

We may not all be called to serve, but we need to support those who do. Because they volunteer, many of our sons, daughters, neighbors and friends do not have to. Because they serve, we’ve asked more of them and their families than we’ve asked of other generations. Because they sacrifice, we are beholders to support them in real and actionable ways.

With service members on a seemingly endless rotation of deployments, their young wives and husbands are often forced to defer their own dreams of returning to school or embarking on a new career. With future long-term deployments looming overhead, they face the decision of whether they can really start something they will more than likely have to put on hold.

We cannot solve all of the challenges military families face, but there is much that can be done to repay the burden they have assumed on behalf of all Americans. Two years ago, my own daughters were the ones who opened my eyes to how simple it can be. After a classmate’s father returned from Iraq with severe injuries, the girls wanted to find a way to show their support not only for the classmates’ family, but for all military families.

They had sent care packages to the troops overseas through church and Brownies, but they wanted to do more.

What started as a kitchen-table idea evolved into ThanksUSA, a national non-profit dedicated to providing post-secondary scholarships to the children and spouses of those serving on active duty, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan. We've been able to fund the vocational school and college dreams of 1,000 military family members last year in all 50 states and D.C. and intend to award another round of scholarships this year. It was our personal honor as a family to give back, get involved, and to thank these brave men and women wearing our country's uniform. It was the least that we could do.

By financing a part of their college education, we were able to give a relatively few military family members a chance to improve their family's earning power. These and the hundreds of thousands of other military families need and deserve a variety of support from community members, civic leaders corporate leaders and all Americans as they set out to reclaim and reassemble their lives in the coming years.

Government leaders in both national political parties as well, must realize there is a yearning community by community across America to get more involved and to repay our civic debt to the military families who have served their own tours of duty over the past six years. Those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan since September 11 answered their country's call to duty with no questions and with no hesitation. Now, when those heroes and their families need your support, will you answer the call?

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