

Will you Answer the Call?

By **Bob Okun** – a Wall Street Journal Opinion, Tuesday 8/28/2007

Stop what you're doing and simply listen for a moment so you may hear a conversation that is going on across America. It is not about who will be the next president, but about why average citizens aren't more fully engaged in the war on terror.

Why haven't we all been asked by our leaders to give more of ourselves as in previous wars? And most importantly, what can and should we all do about the national disconnect between citizen and soldier?

In part, most of us have gone on with our lives with minimal interruption because we are fighting an intensive, protracted two-front war with an all-volunteer force. Only 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. Fewer still have any idea what their families are going through as they wait for their service members to come home.

We as citizens have seemed content that we've contributed to a care package or applauded someone in uniform. But with so little asked of us in terms of a personal commitment, it is our responsibility, our obligation, to rally around those whose loved ones sacrifice their time, their safety and even their lives for our country.

Two years ago, my daughters opened my eyes to this national disconnect between average citizens and soldiers, and to how we may repay the burden military families assumed on our behalf. They had sent care packages to the troops overseas through church and Girl Scouts, but they wanted to do more. Then a classmate's father returned from Iraq with severe injuries. The girls wanted a way to show their support for their classmate's family, and for all military families.

What started as a kitchen-table idea evolved into ThanksUSA, a national non-profit dedicated to providing post-secondary school scholarships to the children and spouses of those serving on active duty, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan. Over 1,000 military family members in all 50 states and D.C. have already received vocational and college scholarships, and another round will be awarded this year. 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.

Since the war began, there have been some shining examples, "best practices" in corporate-speak, of businesses supporting the troops and their families.

Home Depot, CVS and Dell have reached out to hire military spouses. Freddie Mac, purchaser of residential mortgages, has helped injured soldiers and their families to manage their finances upon re-entry to civilian life. Entrepreneurs such as Dan Caulfield (a veteran) recently created Hire a Hero, using the Internet to help returning service members connect with eager businesses seeking skilled workers.

Other service organizations are involved, including Fisher House, which provides housing near hospitals for families of wounded veterans, and information clearinghouses

for military families such as America Supports You, as well as the modern USO, all doing their part daily to help military personnel.

Our family just completed a 7,000-mile cross country road trip in an overcrowded SUV this month, visiting military bases and military families and touring historical sites that define America's greatness. We can anecdotally report that more and more people recognize the national disconnect between average citizen and soldier, and are beginning to take action, neighborhood by neighborhood, community by community to help military families whose loved ones are abroad.

Those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan since 9/11 answered their country's call to duty with no questions or hesitation. When they and their families need your support in coming years, will you answer the call?

Mr. Okun is president and CEO of ThanksUSA.