

The VFW Speaks for Veterans

May 02, 2009

WASHINGTON — In the Thursday Washington Times opinion editorial "Who Speaks for Veterans," Vets for Freedom member Gabe Ledeen maliciously impugned the 110-year-old reputation of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. because he disagreed with the VFW response to a Department of Homeland Security threat assessment on radical extremist groups.

Had Mr. Ledeen actually read the report for what it was – and not for what he thought it meant – he would have discovered it was a poorly written report that merely stated an inescapable fact: Extremist groups want to recruit veterans. The report was nothing more.

He then argued against the separately chartered VFW Political Action Committee endorsement of Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.) in the last congressional race. The congressman is certainly known to make foot-in-mouth statements, but he is also a strong advocate for veterans, service members and their families, which helps explain why his constituents have elected him to Congress 19 times.

And then Mr. Ledeen had the audacity to imply that the VFW needs to recognize its mission "and abandon their petty pandering that continues to stand in the way of real progress and honest representation."

Oh really?

The VFW helped 95,000 veterans last year to recoup \$1.2 billion in earned compensation and pension from the government – for free. We awarded \$3.5 million in youth scholarships, volunteered 13 million hours in our communities and VA and military hospitals, gave out \$2.5 million in grants to help 1,800 military families through temporary financial emergencies, and distributed 11 million free phone cards to deployed and recuperating military personnel.

On Capitol Hill, the VFW was the first veterans' organization to support the previous administration's war on terrorism objectives. Our lobbying efforts helped create traumatic injury disability insurance, a new 21st Century GI Bill, and provided special payments to Vietnam veterans whose children developed spina bifida. The VFW also helped to defeat the current administration's proposal to bill private health insurance for service-connected care,

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as well as defeated previous administration attempts to create VA enrollment fees and increase prescription co-payments and military Tricare premiums. In addition, the VFW single-handedly got all U.S. airlines to waive third checked-luggage fees for military travelers.

The VFW takes a backseat to no one, and this is why we are routinely called to testify before Congress on legislation that impact quality of life programs for America's veterans, service members and their families.

Never has a Vets for Freedom representative been seated next to us at the witness table, which leads me to restate Mr. Ledeen's original question: "Who speaks for veterans?"

Success in Washington requires being pragmatic about issues without leaving enemies in your wake. I would suggest the next time Vets for Freedom – or one of its members – decides to challenge a military or veterans' service organization, they do it in person and not sit on the sidelines and use the press as a shield.

To read the VFW letter to editor, as printed in The Washington Times, go to: <http://washingtontimes.com/news/2009/may/03/the-vfw-speaks-for-veterans/>.

To read the April 30, 2009, Vets for Freedom Op-Ed, go to: <http://washingtontimes.com/news/2009/apr/30/who-speaks-for-veterans/>.