

## Essay for the Seattle National Convention

### WHAT IS VFP'S ROLE IN A WAR-TORN WORLD?

The United Nations reports that there are now far fewer wars in progress than five years ago. The remains of Yugoslavia have finally come to rest, an earthquake has at last brought Indians and Pakistanis to the table in Kashmir, the tsunami did the same in Aceh, and all the warring parties got tuckered out in Sierra Leone. This is happy news for veterans of good will the world over.

Unfortunately other armed conflicts have escalated, with our own government and that of our partner Israel both being into this increased violence up to our armpits. Civilians (as always) are dying at a great rate in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Jordan, Sri Lanka, Darfur and other less-reported venues. In many of these nations the social infrastructure is also being destroyed, making civilized life a great challenge, even when the explosions fade away. And in Iraq the U.S. has turned over so much of the local economy to foreign investors that the Iraqis seem unlikely to regain control of their own land in the foreseeable future.

Where does this leave veterans who would like to apply their special experience to the task of shifting national policy to a more peaceful direction? Is there room for men and women of good will to play a useful role? Surely not in the eyes of today's national policymakers. They know what they want and don't need us to interfere. They'd prefer that we just take our place in line at the VA clinic and shut up.

Not likely to accept such an illegal order, VFP prefers to go public, providing an alternative voice at parades, rallies, street corners, cemeteries, recruiting offices, and other targets of opportunity. It is truly uplifting to march with an organization that ends up receiving the most sustained applause at an otherwise militaristic parade. This is red meat for local chapters, which constitute the solid base of our strength.

It was likewise uplifting to see our most noble members marching and working for the resurrection of the Gulf Coast at a time when our national government was embarrassingly paralyzed. There is nothing like having Michael Moore take public note of your efforts.

But do efforts like these maximize the use of our strength? Do the individual actions of 120 chapters and 5,500 members constitute the maximum impact that our admittedly modest organization can reasonably expect to enjoy on the national scene? So far that has indeed pretty much been our history. We're a retail operation that influences citizens one at a time as we find them in places where we operate.

There are plainly other models. From MoveOn to ANSWER to UFPJ to a hundred web sites and blogs, the internet has allowed many organizations to move up from retailing to wholesaling their message. They reach millions.

Their weakness is that most of those millions are already believers. The “kids” who have mastered the technology to get the message out, largely lack military experience, or for that matter, life experience. The result is that each of us has access to wonderful information and talking points, but not so much of it reaches the general public.

The challenge for veterans, then, is how to expand the reach and influence of the special experience and point of view which we bring to the table. Rightly or wrongly, veterans do command slightly greater attention from the general public on military questions than does the average citizen or blogger. This accounts for the undue influence of the VFW and the American Legion. Our challenge is to amplify our own message for broadcast into the mainstream media and to a potentially alert population.

Plainly the technique of collaring roving reporters at marches and peace rallies has not done the job. Neither have artful press releases from our headquarters in St. Louis. VFP received excellent publicity for its work on the Katrina devastation, but the carryover from our yeoman’s work on that crusade to broadcasting our thoughtful positions on unprovoked war has been very small.

It seems that if America is going to pay greater attention to our wise and thoughtful views on war and peace, we’ll have to do what all other successful policy groups do: grasp America by the lapels. To do this right probably means a full-time public relations professional, stationed in Washington. That city contains the reporters, columnists, publications, contacts and networks which are all but impossible to penetrate from St. Louis.

Unfortunately hard work, good will, and military experience are insufficient angles by themselves to get the general public to listen to us. As war and terror grind on, often perpetrated by our own country, our ability to influence events will unfortunately be limited by our success in mastering public relations. Just one more challenge for those who remain dedicated to bringing peace to the world.

Bill Collins  
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