



The gift of America's magi

BY JEFFREY PHILLIPS AND SUSAN LUKAS, OPINION CONTRIBUTORS — 12/25/18 01:00 PM EST
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As the 115th Congress draws to close, Capitol Hill assumes the tranquility associated with what we in the military call “the cessation of hostilities.”

Few constituents troop to the offices of House and Senate members, fewer cars course the roads of power, and the hearings pretty much dry up.

Beneath the epidermal layer of peace (and quiet), staffers and other insiders are anthill busy speculating about which of them will stay, which will go, and where the goers will go.

“Did you hear (fill in the blank) went to a lobbying firm?” Or a nonprofit organization. Or another congressional office. Or, so-and-so is talking with the Office of Presidential Personnel about a place in the administration (a conversation whose duration may outlast those associated with peaceful coexistence between certain Middle Eastern nations).

This intel often comes from emails that staffers send out to let the legislative tribe know where “they are landing.”

Recently a “Did you hear...?” statement revealed an (unfortunately) unusual follow-on gig. ROA received an email from a Senate staffer who shared that he would be deploying overseas for the next nine months. His Senate job will be there for him when he returns. Although deploying is never easy on a service member or the family, this one was particularly poignant: he would be shipping out just before Christmas.

Yes, it would be better for him if his orders had established a post-Yuletide date, but that usually is not how the military works. The U.S. military gets no pause in its defense of the nation, and rarely do those in its ranks.

Service members also rarely offer serious complaint; they understand they are replacing a comrade whom they don't know, but whom they do know has been gone for months or years from home and family — and if that GI is a member of the Reserve or National Guard, perhaps also from a civilian job that may or may not have appreciated the absence.

The Pentagon recently reported “Guard and Reserve Overseas Contingency Operation Activations” that show more than 38,000 service member deployments; and that many families will miss a brother, sister, mother, or father when they light the night's menorah candle or awake on Christmas morning. The report omits the thousands of Reserve Component members on orders supporting day-to-day operations that take them away from home — thousands more are on those types of orders.

The military may be used to build a border wall in addition to the vast array of operational missions being supported around the world — the Army Reserve is in 30 countries outside the United States. The services increasingly are challenged to meet the demands created by a Congress that, according to Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.), “has abdicated its responsibility for declaring war under the Constitution,” and an administration that — like those before it — too often defaults to unilateral use of armed force as the preferred solution to troubles abroad.

As the 115th Congress grinds ignominiously to a halt, perhaps the 116th, with its freshmen and weathered veterans, will assess how we use our precious human resources who wear our uniform; perhaps they will question the unquestioned notions and “expert” advice that have kept us in harm's way without gain.

Our elected federal leaders again brought us, as ROA [warned last month](#) to a government shutdown: this particular abdication, to borrow the senator's word, of federal responsibility stops funding for our Coast Guard.

These civilian authorities must remember that such decisions — whether they make them or accept them — mean young Americans will leave their families and all they love to serve the nation they love, perhaps not to return. This gift to the nation must not be used without regard of the highest order.

Which may actually mean a member of Congress standing tall and saying, “No, not on my watch,” as you routinely hear resolutely and passionately declared about such-and-such a tax or such-and-such an entitlement or such-and-such a nominee.

Amid the changing of the Capitol Hill “guard,” this remains constant: the fidelity of our young warriors. In his email, our Senate staffer wrote, “In addition, please keep all of our soldiers and service members in your thoughts, especially during the holiday season. I know many of you have served in uniform and have personally experienced being overseas during the holidays. While it will be hard to leave my son before Christmas (his first birthday is on Wednesday), it is an honor to serve our nation.”

Jeffrey Phillips is executive director of [ROA, dba Reserve Organization of America](#), open to all ranks and promoting a strong, ready reserve force. A retired U.S. Army Reserve major general, he served in the Regular Army for nearly 14 years.

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