

ROA head warns of current and future U.S. military unreadiness

ROA, the only national military organization that solely and exclusively supports the Reserve and National Guard, fights for the 1 million members of the Reserve forces.

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“We’re breaking the Army.”

It was 2008 and I was deputy chief of Army public affairs, stationed in the Pentagon. I attended various briefings each week, including situation briefs for senior members of the Army staff.

That is when I heard it.

Units were coming home from deployments, some of them more than a year. No sooner were they home than they were preparing for redeployment. Soldiers and families, units and civilian employers were being ground down.

Concern mounted as the realization deepened: I overheard one general say to another . . . “We’re breaking the Army.”

And that was *not* what we might call a major war.

Good afternoon. It’s an honor to be here with you today, fellow Legionnaires. My post is North Granby, Connecticut, the post once commanded by my father, a World War Two Army Air Forces pilot. *His* father, a veteran of the Great War, joined the Legion in 1919.

We share founders, the American Legion and ROA. The words of General John “Black Jack” Pershing were featured on the cover of the July 4, 1919, issue of *The American Legion Magazine*: “The Legion is destined to be of tremendous value in fostering the ideals and purposes for which we fought, and in spreading among our people the lessons learned in the war period.”

Pershing, a man of vision as well as a first-class warrior, foresaw the dangers awaiting a nation then already shedding itself of readiness as it shed itself of soldiers: by the year’s end, some 3 million men had been discharged from the Army.

To ROA’s founding members at its inaugural convention in the New Willard Hotel, just nearby, on October 2, 1922, General Pershing said, “This convention, assembled to perfect an association of Reserve Officers, is of *especial* importance as a stimulus in the organization of Reserve units throughout the nation.”

Pershing said, "As long as human greed and hatred exist in the hearts of nations and individuals, wars are possible." Pershing framed the purpose of ROA then and for the ensuing century in his call to ensure the nation had trained, ready, and adequate Reserves for the wars he knew would come.

"Just as far as the people become interested in this matter, just that far will Congress stand ready to make the necessary appropriations" -- and in saying that he framed the end state and the way to fulfil that end state: activism for the cause of readiness.

ROA's purpose, a century ago as it was restated in our 1950 congressional charter (signed by President Truman), is true today: "to support and promote the development and execution of a military policy for the United States that will provide adequate National Security."

From its first days, ROA sought to fulfill that purpose with a focus on a strong Reserve and National Guard.

Today that focus is more important than ever: You might not know it from media reporting that usually cites active Army statistics and budget numbers, or the speeches emanating from Pentagon public affairs officers, but the Reserve Components contribute some 40 percent of the total force. The Army Reserve and Army National Guard are more than *half* of the total Army.

About half the forces in Afghanistan and Iraq were from these Reserve Components. Without them, we cannot go to war, much less prevail in war . . . nor can we present a credible deterrent to war.

Yet, how many Americans know this? How many Americans understand that one million young men and women have sworn an oath and stand ready *at this moment* . . . to leave all they love, their families, civilian jobs and careers, communities, and way of life . . . to place their lives into harm's way and possibly lose it all, for our defense . . . ?

. . . How many Americans understand that in the war in Afghanistan and Iraq -- however you judge the outcomes -- some 1,200 young citizen-warriors in the Reserve and National Guard lost their lives doing exactly that?

They were there because our active-duty military is too small to do the job -- and because since Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, our Reserve and National Guard have shown time and again, through every challenge, that they will stand shoulder to shoulder with the active duty -- and deliver.

ROA's mission -- like the American Legion's tenets of upholding and defending the Constitution of the United States, and promoting peace and good will on earth . . . is to ensure our Reserve and National Guard have what they need to recruit sufficient, quality forces; equip and train them; suitably employ them; and capably lead and retain them.

Much of ROA's fights have involved large sums of money that paid for materiel and for people: indeed, our first major victory was in 1924 when we succeeded in getting an additional \$1.5

million added to the war department budget for Reserve training. ROA has won successive legislative and policy victories that have dramatically improved pay and healthcare -- and educational, family care, and VA benefits.

Without ROA there might be no retirement benefits for members of the Reserve Components.

Yet, the readiness of armies – be they armies on land or sea or in the air; or, now, in space -- begins with the *single individual* who must be attracted to service, trained and equipped, led, employed -- and *retained*: we do not hire noncommissioned officers or commanders -- we *grow* them.

If America's employers do not support their citizen-warriors, imagine the effect on our ability to attract young men and women into service. Imagine the effect on our ability to grow young leaders – young sergeants and captains. Imagine the effect on our nation's readiness to meet the peril.

ROA's new Citizen-Warrior Coalition attracts industry support for readiness and to help members of the Reserve Components and their families succeed.

Within the workforce, these citizen-warriors and their families repay the support with discipline, focus, and resiliency.

The Citizen-Warrior Coalition is helping private-sector employers with tax relief initiatives for employers of the Reserve and Guard, and military healthcare for those in the force who may have to deploy quickly and thus deserve full military health care.

We want the development of a true dual-career model for these citizen-warriors. We want a more sustainable use of the Reserve Components. We must have a force ready . . .

. . . For the peril is gathering abroad. In Europe – again. The Pacific – again. The Middle East – perennially. And new to us, the terrifying peril . . . that technology has equipped the individual extremist to strike without warning and without recourse.

Yet our military readiness itself *is* imperiled, with defense funding besieged by other competitors. Our military increasingly fails to meet its recruiting goals, with few young Americans able or willing to serve in uniform, and few parents, teachers, and other influencers familiar with military service or willing to encourage such service.

Considering the possibility of *actual conflict* with a great power, Brookings Senior Fellow Mara Karlin in 2018 gave our readiness a 3 out of ten.

In their March 2021 article, “Redefine Readiness or Lose,” published in the national security online journal *War on the Rocks*, Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps General David H. Berger and Air Force Chief of Staff General Charles Q. Brown wrote . . .

“If the U.S. advantage is eroding as articulated in the last *National Defense Strategy*, it seriously begs the question of whether our current readiness approach and force structure can reverse the trend.”

Readiness, they assert, has been equated with *availability* – what they call “fight-tonight handcuffs” that hobble modernization and the development of a joint force that emphasizes competition and potential war with Russia and China.

“If we fail to adapt and modernize fast enough,” they warn, “wargaming suggests mission failure as the likely outcome.”

. . . We would do well to regard our history of the 1920s and the 1930s.

Ignored by much of the nation convinced of war’s impossibility, discredited by some in government, veterans before us persevered, such as those in ROA and the American Legion and others, supporting readiness for the moment that would come.

They did so in the face of widespread illusions -- such as a colleague’s . . . who before the Russians invaded Ukraine insisted that the next war would be quick and won by cyber – and so forth.

. . . And when the foretold moment came, in early December 1941, the sweat of their brow was the bounty of salvation: America had its cadre upon which to rebuild the military that would save freedom.

A man who lived through this time of peril, struggle, and triumph, a man who served in our Army, has warned us:

“Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction,” Ronald Reagan said.

“We didn’t pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same, or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children’s children what it was once like in the United States where men were free.”

Like the generations of veterans before us, we veterans know of war. When we speak of it, our countrymen and women listen. I ask you today, even as you receive the nation’s thanks, I ask that you *serve* again.

We have just come through two decades of a most unsatisfying war. Our nation is weary with it. Issues of all manner and size press us, from the economy, to unrest, to division at home . . . to war abroad . . .

And yes . . . to the possibility -- even the likelihood -- of yet *more* war, of more demand on our military. The Joint Chiefs of Staff director for operations, a three-star, told us that the operations tempo is not going down. . . . War has not yet, *as we have seen*, been swept into history’s dustbin.

Yet, as Seth Cropsey, director of the Hudson Institute's Center for American Seapower, and Hudson researcher Harry Halem wrote one short year ago, "The understanding that the U.S. is in an interwar period *does not exist*."

And so, fellow Legionnaires, *it is precisely now* that your nation needs your voice, needs your experience. Needs your wisdom. Needs your integrity.

This is now your service to country.

Just as on the field of war we leave no fallen comrade, in the sacred realm of true patriotism, *the veteran never leaves the nation.*

. . . It was a late July afternoon, a Saturday, and I had just arrived in Washington from travel. Veterans were rallying in support of an important bill that faced defeat in the Senate.

By the time I arrived at the Capitol, the pizzas were largely gone and the empty boxes stacked neatly at the foot of the Capitol's steps. About a dozen vets and some other supporters were chatting, and some held signs, made social media posts, and talked to passers-by.

This was the site of the "fire watch" vigil held for a week -- day and night -- that finally won passage for the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022.

The PACT Act was signed into law August 10 by the president, and is now providing expanded VA health care for veterans of Vietnam, Desert Storm and the recent war -- who have been afflicted by battlefield toxins such as the emissions from burn pits.

That is what veterans do; they leave no fallen comrade.

Missing from the White House signing were some veterans who had succumbed to cancers fighting for that very victory. Missing in body, but with us in every other dimension.

Remember those pizzas? They had been personally delivered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs himself, on behalf of the President of the United States, who down with Covid, couldn't deliver them *himself*.

I think of those pizzas and those comrades with whom I had stood -- and slept -- those nights on the Capitol steps during the fire watch vigil . . .

And a young woman who teared up when she thanked me later at an industry convention for getting the PACT Act passed . . . so her father could get VA treatment for Agent Orange.

Remembering the integrity of her father's comrades as they fought for him, and their devotion to country, perhaps hers will be the vote that gains the funding that ensures a young warrior gets the equipment needed for readiness.

Remarks to American Legion Post 20
Jeffrey E. Phillips

Perhaps one of your children, or my Marine Corps staff sergeant nephew-in-law or Air Force senior airman nephew, will stand *not alone* on the ramparts.

Truly, in leaving no comrade, we serve our country. And in serving our country, we answer the question that President Reagan implicitly asked:

“Will we be the generation that keeps the faith? Will we be the generation that passes freedom along to the next? Will we be the generation which ensures that freedom does not perish?” . . .

To look out at your faces today, my fellow patriots, I see that the question is answered.

ROA is *proud* to stand with you.

Thank you.