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The “Greatest Generation” Has Now Given Way to the “Betrayed-est Generation”

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In the summer of 1932, approximately 43,000 veterans and supporters assembled in the Anacostia Flats area of Washington D.C. They had come from all reaches of the United States, demanding early cash redemption of their service bonus certificates from their time served in World War I. Organizers called the demonstrators the Bonus Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.), to echo the name of World War I's American Expeditionary Forces, while the media referred to them as the “[Bonus Army](#)”. After the B.E.F. refused to vacate the area, President Herbert Hoover then-Army Chief of Staff Major General Douglas MacArthur to clear the protestors out. On July 28th, the Army confronted the protesting veterans. During the few direct clashes, two veterans were shot and killed; one, Joe Angelo, was reported to have saved George Patton's life at the Battle of the Meuse. Patton, then only a Major, was ironically also part of the forces engaged in clearing the protestors out. The aftermath, which was a political disaster for Hoover, paved the way for FDR's crushing election victory and a soon-to-follow swath of reform programs aimed at providing restitution and recompense for our WWI veterans.

In just a brief perusal of the often-forgotten tale of the “Bonus Army” of 1932, one can quickly draw parallels to the veterans of today. Having served and fought in America's longest war, hundreds of thousands of veterans are struggling. They struggle with mental health, they flirt with suicide, they confront the juggernaut of the U.S. government in an aim to recoup the benefits and entitlements they were promised when they entered the service. There are no mass marches on Washington (yet), and no clashes with our currently-serving forces (except perhaps in the ideology arena), but the fight is just as real, and the reasons are eerily like those of our WWI veteran predecessors – a fight for justice and the stinging sentiment of betrayal.

Shortly after 9/11, [tens of thousands of Americans](#) answered the call to serve. Driven by a myriad of motives, we came in droves to serve our country, aspiring to protect it so that no one could ever repeat what we had just

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witnessed. Pride and patriotism were at a high not seen in several generations. Many labeled us “The Next Greatest Generation,” an homage to our forefathers from “The Greatest Generation” who fought so valiantly against global tyranny in World War II.

And now, here we sit two decades, trillions of dollars, thousands of lives, one shameful defeat, another non-descript non-victory, and an immeasurable trust deficit later: many of us feeling disillusioned and despondent. And if it weren't bad enough fighting the emotional and physical demons of the traumas inflicted from our decades-long wars-gone-awry, we now fight at home against a wayward and corrupt military institution and its bedfellows who complicitly insulate it from justice and accountability. We watch as VA benefits are inexplicably delayed or denied, we watch as our brothers and sisters in arms still serving are assaulted with veritable impunity, we watch as 17 of our veteran comrades kill themselves every day, we watch thousands unceremoniously shuffled out of the service, we watch the political theater of the Afghanistan evacuation hearings pass without any real accountability, we watch yet another self-serving General / Admiral slink away into a defense contracting Board of Directors position, we watch as the government covers for senior leader sexual predators, we watch as service members' rights and due processes are consistently denied. In short, we watch, as we have for the last twenty years, our military devolve from highly esteemed into just another self-serving arm of our federal government. That, in and of itself, is cause for disillusionment, but the more bitter pill we swallow is because these abuses, these wrongs, this moral and ethical decay comes from the very institution that so **hypocritically** touted itself to be of such high moral ethical character. “Duty,” “Honor,” “Country” were more than catchy buzzwords when we joined. They had meaning. We were expected to live up to those standards and likewise expected our leaders to do the same.

Over time, we realized that expectation was a one-way street. We were held accountable for alleged breaches of trust and character. Our leaders were oftentimes not. We realized it as we watched our leadership, when faced with decisions to do right by us or right by themselves and their careers, consistently opted for the latter. We realized it when we saw time and time again our leaders' outright refusal to ever accept culpability or responsibility for anything. We realized it when we watched those still serving be abused, harassed, and discriminated against and our leaders' answers were not to eradicate it, but instead to cover it up. We realized it as our leaders violated the Constitution and laws of our country with impunity under the battle cry of “for good order and discipline!” In short: we realized what our military had become: corrupted.

I am convinced history will see the Gen X and Millennial veterans of our post-9/11 military as the “Betrayed-est Generation” – those who served and sacrificed so much for decades only to be cast aside when no longer useful to the military leadership cabal, or no longer tolerant of its immoral and oftentimes illegal ways. And while this leaves many of us reeling from our deep and sometimes invisible moral injuries, we also feel another emotion: **resolve**. We are resolved to not let history repeat itself. We are resolved to do what we can to see through much-needed change for our military. We are resolved that while we may be a generation betrayed, our children will not be – whether because we succeed at bringing about that change or succeed at dissuading our sons and daughters from serving at all. In that regard, our end state is by now clear: we may be the “Betrayed-est Generation,” but the next generation will certainly not be.

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