

# An "Americafest" for All Our Country's Veterans

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For 99% of Americans, this Fourth of July marks yet another annual tradition of barbecues, block parties and fireworks. It's the halfway point of a long hot summer. A day to celebrate freedom, 'Merica, and [being born in the U.S.A.](#)

But for the other one percent? The war still [rages on](#).

In Afghanistan and throughout the world, hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops will celebrate this Independence Day apart from their families, friends and neighbors back home. For them, the true power of this holiday takes on heightened meaning. It's the first Fourth of July [without U.S. boots](#) on the ground in Baghdad. It's also possibly the [last for combat troops](#) in Afghanistan. And many service members are wondering, "So, what comes next?"



*MOB Lash: A Marine Turns 21 at War - [Bill Putnam Photo](#)*

Over 2.4 million Americans have served in Iraq and Afghanistan in the past decade. But it's fair to say those who have returned have come home to a vastly different America than the one they left behind.

On America's 236th birthday, the U.S. job market for our nation's veterans is the worst in decades -- certainly, nothing to light fireworks over. In a recent survey, [nearly 17 percent](#) of IAVA members reported that they were facing unemployment. But if coming home to an unemployment check isn't bad enough, thousands more can't get their foot in the door for care at the VA either. Despite record budget increases, the system is losing veterans daily in its staggering backlog of [870,000 disability claims](#). Meanwhile, student veterans are under the siege of [predatory for-profit schools](#) who are gouging the New GI Bill. And then there's the silent crisis claiming lives throughout our community: in the first 155 days of 2012, [154 active-duty and reserve troops](#) committed suicide. That's one a day, and more than we lost in combat in Afghanistan this year.

No Iraq or Afghanistan veteran should be forced to live this shameful reality, and no American should turn a blind eye to it especially this Fourth of July. "Freedom is only part of the story and half the truth...," Viktor Frankl wrote. "That is why I recommend that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplanted by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast."

As we celebrate the liberty for which our veterans fought, it's time for all Americans to own up to our collective responsibility as a nation: to care for the men and women who, at risk to their own lives and loss to their families, have carried our country through the past decade of war.

Recently, I met an ordinary American named [Philip Green](#) who is owning up to this bargain. If we were ever to build a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast, the architect should commit Phil's likeness to memory. Phil is a proud American, a successful entrepreneur and the father of three grown kids in law and medical schools. But just like 99% of Americans, neither Phil nor his children have served our country in uniform. A couple of months ago, the weight of this truth woke Phil up in the middle of the night: "Ten years ago, someone else's sons and daughters went to war," he told me. "I was able to sleep at night dreaming of my kid's medical school graduation while another parent was up all night worrying about whether their child would survive on patrol in Iraq or Afghanistan."

So Phil and his wife, Dr. Elizabeth Cobbs, decided to do something bold about it. They called their best friends, Glenn and Laurie Garland, and Jim and Patty Stimmel, and last week they committed their families' wealth to launch the first of its kind [Veteran Support Fund](#). The fund is an innovative challenge to other American families, whose children never served, to step up for our troops and veterans. It's a centralized platform where Americans can [support and give](#) to five effective, trusted, best-in-class veterans' organizations, including [Operation Mend](#), [Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors](#), [Operation Homefront](#), the [National Military Family Association](#) and [IAVA](#). Each directly touches the lives of veterans and their families, whether it's providing reconstructive surgery or emergency financial aid to veterans, offering grief counseling to the spouses and children of the fallen, or fighting to expedite veterans' critical health care claims stuck in VA limbo.

The Green, Stimmel and Garland families' are testament that Americans have the backs of this New Greatest Generation. But this Fourth of July every American can shoulder this responsibility in large and small ways to make a meaningful and personal impact for our veterans and their families. On this holiday, many Americans can start by coming out to meet and support these men and women in person.

That's why tonight IAVA is bringing thousands of Americans together coast-to-coast to bridge the military-civilian divide. In Pasadena, we're joining forces with the Rose Bowl to rally 40,000 Californians around our vets and their families at [Americafest 2012](#). Thousands more are coming out for Fourth of July and "[Welcome Home](#)" celebrations from Austin to Philadelphia, Fort Bragg to Hamilton, Norfolk to Portsmouth, and Chicago to St. Paul. We hope you'll stand with us, and encourage your friends and family to [join IAVA on the ground too](#).

Because if there's one thing we must do as a nation it's recognize the true power of this Independence Day by uniting around the men and women who have carried the burden of war for us for so long -- and honoring their sacrifice with an equal measure of support here at home.