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Veterans in the City

Posted by [Chloe Fox](#)

Last week, the Senate not only passed a jobs bill, they did so almost unanimously—a rare achievement in the current partisan climate. The bill, the VOW to Hire Heroes Act, is intended to address rising unemployment among veterans and was voted on almost exactly three weeks after President Obama announced the end of the Iraq War. More than forty thousand troops will return from Iraq by the year's end, after nearly nine years of fighting there. Although their homecoming is an undeniably happy occasion, there are already questions about the effects a decade of war will have on young veterans.

The Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, in an effort to draw attention to these questions, recently hosted their annual gala at Cipriani on 42nd Street. It was the organization's fifth such event, but this year felt different—one of the wars that so many of its members had sacrificed for might finally be ending. Tireak Tulloch, who served eight years in the Marine Corp Reserve and deployed twice to Iraq said, hesitantly, "It feels pretty good. It feels good that that phase is coming to a close." But he added, "Our hope is that support continues to grow. Especially with these troops coming home, the issues that exist now, if we don't correct them now, it's just going to get worse when they come home."

I.A.V.A. had celebrities like Stephen Colbert and Brian Williams on hand as well. Colbert, who was the evening's Civil Service honoree, accepted his award with uncharacteristic humility. "Considering what you veterans do for our country," he said, "and what I do at our country, I can't help but suspect on some level that I'm being punked right now." Throughout the evening, the stars kept surprisingly low profiles. "We're honoring the real V.I.P.s in this city tonight," Paul Rieckhoff, I.A.V.A.'s founder, said. "There're a lot of fancy events that go on in New York, but we're honoring real heroes."

Rieckhoff, who is thirty-five, served as an infantry platoon leader in Baghdad in 2003, taking part in over a thousand combat patrols. He towered over the guests he was greeting like a genial Mr. Clean. Between posing for pictures, he reflected on the importance of hosting the event in New York and "bridging the civilian-military divide." "I think New York gets a bad rap," he said. "A lot of people think New York isn't a patriotic city, that it doesn't love our military. That's just not right." In the city's fluid social mix, it was easy to bring together titans of Wall Street, like Pete Peterson, and art, like Garry Trudeau, with "colonels and sergeants," he said. Rieckhoff was called for another photo op—this time with columnist Les Gelb, who was busy lining up the participants in front of I.A.V.A.'s backdrop. "General Gelb is in charge," Rieckhoff bellowed as he wedged in. Gelb looked pleased with the title.

The event's special honoree, Aaron Mankin, was a twenty-nine-year-old Iraq veteran from San Antonio. In 2005, while serving as a Marine journalist in Iraq, Mankin's twenty-six-ton tank was hit by an improvised explosive device and thrown ten feet in the air. Four Marines died in the blast, and Mankin and eleven others were badly injured. He suffered damage to his lungs and throat from smoke inhalation, and twenty-five per cent of his body, including his face, was burned. Doctors performed more than fifty surgeries on Mankin, including ones to reconstruct his nose, lips, and ears. He is now the spokesperson for Operation Mend, a program run by the U.C.L.A. Medical Center to treat severely injured servicemembers.

Mankin, who was dressed in a grey three-piece suit with a deep purple shirt, shook hands using his left hand—his right is missing two fingers from the explosion—displaying a distinctly Southern charm. “May I put my arm around you, Madam Speaker?” he asked Christine Quinn, the City Council speaker, as they arranged themselves for the cameras. Quinn beamed up at him and nodded enthusiastically.

As a color guard prepared to take the stage, Mankin headed to the bar to refresh his rum and coke and picked up on Rieckhoff's theme. It wasn't his first trip to New York, but, as he looked around at Cipriani's massive columns and vaulted ceiling, he seemed freshly energized. He mentioned the financial aid for his surgeries and the support networks that got him through them. “It almost seems as though everything I've been a beneficiary of, and the benevolence of Americans, has really been funneled through New York City,” he said. His voice was parched from all the talking, and he seemed relieved to be sitting down. “It seems to start here.”