

OPINION

LETTERS POLICY

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WEEKLY COLUMN | SEN. TOM O'MARA

A time to focus on American heroism



SEN. TOM O'MARA

So much of what we associate with the two American heroes who take front and center stage in February, Washington and Lincoln, focuses on their leadership during the two wars that defined their service to the nation: the American Revolutionary War, and the American Civil War.

We focus on the unparalleled legacies of Washington and Lincoln as commanders in chief, which means we're always reminded, at the same time, about the place of the American soldier throughout history. And that's a reminder which never fails to serve us well.

President Washington himself famously said, "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive veterans of early wars were treated and appreciated by our nation."

It's this expression of appreciation to our veterans, this respect and their standing in the nation's collective eye that has been polished to a truly deserving shine throughout the years since 9/11, as the ongoing war against terror has sent troops off to war in Iraq and Afghanistan. We celebrate this heroism, like never before, in countless symbolic and often ceremonial ways. But we also honor it at the more practical level of governmental policies, programs and services.

Take, for example, developments over the past few weeks as part of a longstanding effort to better assist New York's disabled veterans.

Last year's state budget created a new "Hire-A-Vet" tax credit that took effect at the start of this year and allows businesses to become eligible for a valuable state tax credit after they've employed a post-9/11 veteran for one year. Hire-A-Vet was an important achievement, one that I was proud to help sponsor and fight for, and we believe it will help make a difference for returning veterans coming home to a nation and a state where it's tough to find a job.

Approximately 88,000 New Yorkers have served or continue to serve in Afghanistan or Iraq. The numbers make it clear: federal Bureau of Labor statistics from 2012 show that unemployment reached a staggering 20 percent for veterans under the age of 30 who had recently returned home from Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, statistics show that a significant number of post-9-11 veterans report service-connected disabilities.

Now we have a real opportunity to build on last year's Hire-A-Vet success and, this year, enact what the Senate calls "Jobs for Heroes" to more fully assist our service-disabled veteran-owned small

businesses. It would mark another investment in the future of veterans and serve to help honor their service and sacrifice in a concrete way.

One in seven veterans is self-employed or a small business owner. New York has the fourth-highest number of veteran-owned businesses - trailing only California, Texas and Florida. The Senate has proposed and acted on Jobs for Heroes for several years. This year's legislation, which I also co-sponsor and strongly support, would establish at least a five-percent set-aside in state contracts for service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses. The legislation is modeled after the successful federal contract set-aside program. Similar programs have been created in more than 40 other states.

As I noted, the Senate has repeatedly approved the legislation but it hasn't been acted on by the Assembly leadership, despite growing bipartisan support.

This year, however, the politics are shaping up differently. First, the concept was endorsed by Governor Andrew Cuomo in his State of the State message in January.

Noting the high unemployment rate among post-9/11 veterans, the governor pledged to take steps "towards establishing up to a 5 percent goal in the awarding of state contracts to service disabled veteran-owned small businesses."

That State of the State pledge has now been followed by a more specific - and more important -- gubernatorial action. Just last week, on the very day the Senate held a Jobs for Heroes Lobby Day to urge more widespread support for the action, the governor unveiled a specific legislative proposal that closely mirrors the Senate's measure.

It means that this February we're not only celebrating the history of American heroism as part of our annual President's Day observances, but here in New York State we've moved a step closer, once again, to taking bipartisan action to honor and salute this modern-day heroism in a practical, difference-making way for many of today's veterans.

In other words, it's some good news at the right time.

State Sen. Tom O'Mara, R-Big Flats, represents New York's 58th Senate District, which includes Steuben, Chemung, Schuyler and Yates counties, and part of Tompkins County.

REDBLUE AMERICA

Is Obamacare undermining the American work ethic?

A new report by the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office says the Affordable Care Act will reduce the effective size of the U.S. workforce by 2.5 million over the next 10 years. The White House responded that the law is giving Americans more choices by removing the link between work and health insurance. But critics of Obamacare seized on the report as more evidence the president's health-care reform law is doing more harm than good. Is the Affordable Care Act hurting the work ethic? Joel Mathis and Ben Boychuk, the RedBlueAmerica columnists, weigh in.

There's a lot to be said for work, in and of itself. A person who collects \$10,000 in benefits and sits on the couch all day probably won't find life quite as satisfying as the person who earns the same \$10,000. Many of us find that our work gives us purpose and meaning, and that's pretty great.

Before it can do any of that, though, work must give us a living. Increasingly, it fails to do so.

We have noted here before, and we shall note again: For 40 years, the productivity of middle-class workers has increased greatly even as their wages have stagnated - it often takes two full-time working parents to achieve the earning power that a single parent did a generation ago.

Problems for the middle class were exacerbated by the Great Recession, in which many workers lost lucrative jobs and replaced them with poorer-paying work that, often, doesn't quite pay all the bills. Unless you're rich, it's not been a fun generation to be an American worker.

The irony in all this: Republicans have spent



JOEL MATHIS

the Obama administration complaining about every small act that might put a dent in the earnings of America's richest citizens. Those folks need to keep as much of their money as possible, the argument goes, or they'll lose the incentive to work and create and produce new goods for all of us to buy and enjoy.

Apparently, incentives apply only to the rich. For the rest of us, conservatives apparently believe we should be grateful for what we have - witness recent arguments that iPads are so fun that income inequality shouldn't matter - and that toil itself should be its own reward.

What's this have to do with Obamacare? Conservatives worry that government is severing the link between work and reward. The private sector has done a fine job of that on its own. At least under Democrats, there's still a reward.

Watching defenders of President Obama's founding health-care reforms try to explain why a smaller workforce is a benefit of the law has been a wonder to behold.

It's great, they say, that health insurance is no longer attached to employment. As White House mouthpiece Jay Carney put it, "Americans would no longer be trapped in a job just to provide coverage for their families, and would have the opportunity to pursue their dreams."

That's certainly one way of looking at it. But what the Congressional Budget Office report says actually underscores what conservative critics of the law have been warning about all along: Obamacare discourages productive work.

A spate of new economic research backs the conservative argument. As the federal government expands eligibility for Medicaid, people will have fewer incentives to work.

But that's not all. The law's tax increases and so-called "employer mandate," which the Obama administration just decided to delay for yet another year, discourages employers from hiring people, because health care is terribly expensive - made more so by the new law's requirements to cover just about everything under the sun.



BEN BOYCHUK

More to the point, the law's "individual mandate," which penalizes people for not purchasing insurance, discourages people from working too much. Given a choice between working and working less, or working and not working at all, the law will nudge people away from work toward not working.

Bear in mind, the U.S. labor participation rate is already at historic lows. The sluggish economy has driven millions of otherwise productive people from the workforce. As Mercatus Center researcher Charles Blahous noted at the Manhattan Institute's e21 blog, "With millions of baby boomers heading into retirement and unsustainable deficits on the horizon, that is a huge self-inflicted problem."

How, then, is Obamacare progress? What kind of "dreams" does it inspire?

The kind of dreams that imagine millions of Americans living - subsisting, really - on government largesse, at the expense of an ever-dwindling class of productive citizens. The dream is a nightmare of dependency.

ANOTHER VIEW



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Reed's no vote on debt ceiling a gimmick

TO THE EDITOR | On Tuesday evening, 221 adults in the House of Representatives voted to increase the debt ceiling. Tom Reed was not among them.

Like all votes to increase the debt ceiling, this was totally meaningless. Increasing the debt ceiling does not allow the government to spend money. It simply provides borrowing authority to

pay for things Congress has already approved. Until recently, raising the debt ceiling - which did not even exist prior to FDR - was pro forma. Nowadays, it is simply another contrivance for high drama while real work goes undone.

Tom's stated rationale for voting against the measure was that he could not support continuation of the status quo.

The reality is that within the Republican caucus, not a single substantive alternative

emerged, nor did even a symbolic measure (restoring military pension reductions, demanding approval of the Keystone pipeline, hacking away once again at the Affordable Care Act) garner majority support.

Tom voted against raising the debt ceiling not because he wanted the government to default, but rather because after the head count he was allowed to vote no, knowing the measure would still pass. While such a maneuver is not new, it

used to be a sideshow as Congress governed. Now it is simply the show.

Reed supporters - especially the Tea Party - will praise Tom for standing up to the powers that be. Sadly, they don't understand that they are being played. The path to smaller government and balanced budgets involves working hard to make informed choices. Tom continues to show that he is not up to the task.

Harvey R. Greenberg
 Dundee