



Veterans Feel Left Out, Ignored in Bush Speech

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Dana Hughes Reports:



It's not what President Bush said but what he left out of his State of the Union address that has outraged a major veteran's group, the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

In his nearly one-hour State of the Union address, President Bush never mentioned the 1.6 million veterans the war has already produced, while repeatedly asking the American public and Congress to support his plan to send 20,000 more troops to Iraq.

"For the second year in a row, the president chose to mention the troops only really as a prop for his policies and ignored that these folks are coming home as new veterans," says Paul Rieckhoff, the executive director of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and an Iraq war veteran himself.

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The lack of a mention shows "veterans aren't a priority for the Bush administration," says Rieckhoff.

Rieckhoff says, in his view, it's irresponsible for Bush to talk about increasing troops in the ongoing war without addressing shortcomings in health care and economic benefits that now plague an overburdened Veterans Affairs Administration.

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"It might not be politically palpable for him, but he's got to talk about how he's gonna deal with folks with no arms, folks who've been paralyzed, folks who're at Walter Reed and also the folks who've come home and are facing their second and third deployment," says Rieckhoff.

Rieckhoff also says addressing the issue of returning veterans is not only the right thing to do but also critical to recruitment and morale. "It sends a bad message to young people if they don't hear that Americans take care of their veterans," he says. "It's going to make them reluctant to join, and it's going to ultimately endanger our national security."

A spokesperson for the White House told ABC News, "The president regularly expresses his strong support for America's veterans and his commitment to insuring they receive the support they've earned," and to expect a large increase for the Veteran's Department in the president's proposed 2008 budget.