

OTHER OPINIONS

Rep. Rangel's viewpoint on today's military is dead wrong

BY BOB McDONNELL

US. Rep. Charlie Rangel, D-N.Y., recently appeared on Fox News' Sunday news program. Speaking about the makeup of our all-volunteer armed services, he remarked, "If a young fella has an option of having a decent career or joining the Army to fight in Iraq, you can bet your life he would not be in Iraq."

As the father of a daughter who just returned from a yearlong tour of duty in Iraq, as the attorney general of Virginia who has several Iraq veterans serving in this office, and as a veteran myself, I take great issue with this statement. I would "bet my life," to paraphrase Rep. Rangel, that he is wrong.

Today's military is quite representative of the national population. As you read this, tens of thousands of American men and women are putting their lives on the line in Afghanistan and Iraq. They volunteered for this dangerous, but critically important, duty.

Our oldest daughter Jeanine is an Army 1st lieutenant who served as a



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signal platoon leader working on satellite communications around Baghdad and throughout northern Iraq. She did so as a volunteer, and as a graduate of Notre Dame University. She chose to serve her country.

Just in my office I can find examples of highly educated young Americans who chose to leave Main Street and serve on the battlefield. Assistant Attorney General Rusty McGuire served two tours of duty during the War on Terror. Rusty served as a coalition forces liaison to the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq, helping ensure a free, fair and secure election in the country.

Jeanine and Rusty are not alone in their service. From former NFL-star Pat Tillman, to Sen.-elect Jim Webb's Marine son, our troops choose military service for the right reasons. This has been true from the fields of Yorktown to the streets of Baghdad.

They do this, I remind Congressman Rangel — a Korean War veteran himself — because they realize the benefits of discipline, education and character derived from military ser-

vice. They understand that freedom has a price, and that patriots have always been called on to fight the enemies of democracy.

Between enlisted recruits and officers one can find a full range of individuals in the U.S. military. This diversity is what makes the congressman's comment so appalling. There are soldiers with graduate degrees and soldiers with high school diplomas working together every day in our armed forces, by choice.

If anything, the makeup of our armed forces actually trends toward being better educated and more financially secure than their civilian counterparts. A recent study by The Heritage Foundation found that while the 2004 national percentage

of high school graduates was 79.8 percent, the average among enlisted military recruits was 96.8 percent. The same study also found that incoming recruits are most likely to be from middle-class neighborhoods.

To quote the study, "When comparing these wartime recruits (2003-2005) to the resident popula-

tion ages 18-24 (as recorded in Census 2000), areas with median household income levels between \$35,000 and \$79,999 were overrepresented, along with income categories between \$85,000 and \$94,999."

In January, Rangel will assume the chairmanship of the powerful House Ways and Means Committee. From his office in the U.S. Capitol he will look down the National Mall, home to many memorials to our nation's military and their sacrifices for our freedom.

As Rangel sits in this exalted position, I sincerely hope he will remember that he is there, enjoying the fruits

of freedom, because of the countless young Americans who have chosen service over comfort, duty over ease.

Another attorney in our office, Greer Saunders, recently returned from Iraq as well. While there she served as an enlisted Marine with the 6th Civil Affairs Group. Her unit included lawyers, doctors, emergency medical technicians, a registered nurse, police officers, teachers, a state official from Colorado and an architect. It also included people who were unemployed.

Greer summed this all up perfectly noting, "That's the great thing about the military — it's one shining example of how different groups of people from all races, faiths and walks of life come together to achieve a common goal."

Rep. Rangel would do well to remember this lesson before he makes any further inappropriate statements about the brave men and women serving our nation.

■ Bob McDonnell is attorney general of Virginia. He served 21 years in the United States Army, both active duty and reserve, retiring as a lieutenant colonel.

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