

## The Voice of a New Generation of Veterans

After Serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, White House Aide Tackles Policy Challenges

By Philip Rucker - Washington Post Staff Writer - Thursday, September 3, 2009

Matt Flavin oversaw a 450-person intelligence unit in Bosnia, deployed overseas with the Navy SEALs and survived combat in [Afghanistan](#) and [Iraq](#). But the challenge now facing the 29-year-old is in Washington, where he is charged with helping President Obama make good on his pledge to expand veterans' benefits.

Flavin, director of the new White House Office of Veterans and Wounded Warrior Policy, is the administration's liaison to the nation's roughly 23 million veterans. For a president with no military experience, he orchestrates outreach to the politically prized constituency.

In a community dominated by veterans of the Vietnam War, Flavin embodies a generational change. He and the few other administration officials who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan -- including Tammy Duckworth, an assistant secretary at the Department of Veterans Affairs -- offer a voice in Washington for the men and women fighting in today's conflicts.

"The fact that he's one of us, a combat veteran himself -- he's young and from our generation -- has given us a real advantage," said Paul Reickhoff, a former Army platoon leader in Iraq and founder of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. "He was in the military a short time ago, so we don't have to explain to him what traumatic brain injury is."

Eight months into the Obama administration, Flavin's fingerprints are on a range of policies expanding benefits to veterans of current conflicts. To ease the processing of claims at Veterans Affairs, Flavin is helping introduce an electronic medical records system. He is trying to smooth the implementation of the new GI Bill to grant more generous education benefits to veterans of Iraq, Afghanistan and other post-Sept. 11 conflicts. And he is crafting policy to better address post-traumatic stress disorder and brain injuries.

Flavin said in an interview that he values veterans' views and experience, and takes them into account when shaping policy. "It's changing the paradigm of outreach and making sure there is a conversation there that is substantive and it isn't just political, handshake . . . and, 'Hey, here's a picture in the Oval Office.' "

Leaders of veterans service organizations said they have been surprised by how frequently Obama meets with them and his willingness to include their views in drafting his policies. Flavin seems to keep such leaders on speed dial. "He e-mails you at midnight or takes your call at 7 in the morning," said retired Adm. Norbert Ryan, president of the Military Officers Association of America.

Still, success is not likely to come easily. "This tends to be a battle of inches," said Noel Koch, a Vietnam veteran and former Reagan administration official who is now a deputy undersecretary of defense and a mentor to Flavin. "There are no major achievements that you can point to. The major achievement is the growing understanding on the part of our wounded, ill and injured warriors that the basic ethos of 'leave no warrior behind' is being observed very religiously."

At a Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in Phoenix last month, Obama said his 2010 spending plan -- which includes an 11 percent increase in VA funding -- invests in "more treatment centers, more case managers and better medical care." He called post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury "the defining injuries of today's wars" and pledged support for mobile and rural clinics to reach veterans who have returned home.

Veterans are an important political constituency, making up about 15 percent of voters in the 2008 presidential contest. They have voted reliably Republican, last year choosing Sen. John McCain (Ariz.), a decorated Vietnam veteran, over Obama, 54 percent to 44 percent.

Obama is trying to make inroads, delivering a speech last month on veterans policy at George Mason University as well as the one in Arizona. Graham Platner, an Iraq veteran from Maine who attended the George Mason event, said he appreciates a voice like Flavin's helping to create policy.

"Veterans affairs have always been relegated to the Vietnam generation and not us, so it's good that the new administration is bringing in a young guy who served with us," said Platner, 24. "He's no slouch."

Motivated by the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Flavin joined the military after graduating from Amherst College. "I had every opportunity to take a well-paying, fast-paced job in some Wall Street firm," Flavin said in a 2008 speech at his alma mater.

He rose quickly, becoming a top intelligence officer after a few years. He was assigned to serve with a Navy SEAL team, earning a Bronze Star and a Combat Action Ribbon for his service in Iraq and Afghanistan. He joined Obama's campaign during the Democratic primary while taking classes at Georgetown Law School.

Flavin worked closely with senior foreign policy aide Denis McDonough during the campaign, and in January he was hired to work for the National Security Council. But he found himself drawn to veterans issues, and by the spring he branched off to found the wounded warrior office.

"To go to Walter Reed or to Bethesda [Naval Medical Center] and see a military family who's trying to make it in the face of stiff odds, sometimes in very, very difficult circumstances, is just something that I feel passionately about," Flavin said. "I feel very fortunate to be able to now do this in sort of an institutional framework."

*Polling director Jon Cohen and polling analyst Jennifer Agiesta contributed to this report.*