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Senator Presses White House on Hiring Veterans

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By Stephen Barr
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It's a never-ending tale -- a stern, workhorse senator has an idea, and a White House aide makes nice, without showing support.

First, the idea.

Sen. Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa) wrote to the president on Feb. 27, urging the administration to ramp up its hiring of recent combat veterans. Grassley asked President Bush to establish the goal that 10 percent of all new hires by federal agencies be veterans.

"Because the nature of military service can make it more difficult for veterans to find employment after separating from the service, the federal government has a special obligation to look to veterans first when federal jobs come open," Grassley wrote.

Now, the reply.

Karl Zinsmeister, the president's domestic policy adviser, sent Grassley a letter Tuesday that noted the 10 percent hiring goal. Bush "wholeheartedly agrees" that the nation owes a special debt to veterans and their families, Zinsmeister wrote, pointing to the president's State of the Union address as proof.

The January speech, Zinsmeister wrote, "highlighted the need for federal government hiring preferences to be extended to spouses as well as veterans. This simple step will help alleviate the lower-than-average employment rates for military spouses."

The government is reaching out to recruit veterans, and they make up 25 percent of the civil service, Zinsmeister wrote.

And, now, the reply to the reply.

The White House "response lacked much substance and the central request of my letter remains unaddressed," Grassley said in a second letter to Bush, dated Wednesday. "The overall figures hide a wide disparity between various departments and agencies in terms of their success in recruiting and hiring veterans."

For example, 46.4 percent of new hires in the Air Force civilian ranks were veterans in 2006, while only 4.4 percent of new employees at the Department of Health and Human Services and just 1.6 percent of new hires at the Federal Trade Commission were veterans, Grassley wrote.

A third of the Cabinet departments and more than half of independent agencies fall short of filling 10 percent of their job openings with veterans, Grassley said.

The White House "attempted to change the subject and ignore my request," Grassley wrote. He again asked the president to commit to a 10 percent hiring goal for each agency.

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