

Idaho Statesman

APRIL 23, 2019



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Dan McKnight, 43, is a veteran of the Marines, Army and Idaho Army National Guard who wants to bring the troops home. On April 24, he is leading an event at BSU with college Democrats and Republicans in an effort to reach Sen. Jim Risch. He founded BringOurTroopsHome.us.

Afghanistan vet now fights to bring all U.S. troops home

Dan McKnight, center right in back wearing the flight suit, and his team pose before they fly their first mission on a UH60 Black Hawk helicopter at Forward Operating Base Salerno, Afghanistan.



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Of the hundreds of phone calls he makes a day, starting at 6 a.m. and running through dinnertime, Dan McKnight estimates that maybe one-third of those actually result in a conversation.

But he's willing to talk to anyone who will listen.

McKnight, 43, of Meridian, served in the Marines, the Army and the Idaho Army National Guard for a total of 13 years, joining the Marine Corps at just 19 years old. The Boise native spent more than a year overseas

in Afghanistan while in the Army, from December 2005 to February 2007.

As a soldier, McKnight never questioned the mission. But since returning home, his mindset about war has changed.

McKnight started the BringOurTroopsHome.US program in January after Idaho Sen. Jim Risch's appointment as chairman of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The veteran's goal is to get Congress to bring U.S. troops home from the ongoing war zones in the Middle East. A rally is being held in coordination with the college Democrat and Republican groups at Boise State University at 6 p.m. Wednesday at the BSU Student Union to try to gather support for a resolution McKnight has crafted.

SEE MCKNIGHT, 4A

McKNIGHT

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1A

Why does McKnight care so deeply about this? Why does he spend 80 percent of his 12-hour days making phone calls to politicians and other leaders?

McKnight points to a collection of pictures in front of his fireplace.

“Those guys. Those guys right there,” he said, gesturing toward photos of him and his military friends. He pauses and briefly looks down; tears begin to well in his eyes.

“The damage that is done to the guys who are paying the price. We have a value in the military, it’s a core value that we leave no one behind. And right now we’ve left a lot of people behind. We’ve left a lot of blood and a lot of treasure there. It’s time to stop it.”

As of March, there are approximately 14,000 United States troops deployed in Afghanistan, according to *The New York Times*. There are around 5,200 troops in Iraq, according to the *Military Times*, and an additional 2,000 in Syria, per *USA Today*.

Since entering Afghanistan in 2001 for Operation Enduring Freedom, there have been 2,424 American troop fatalities, per the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count. Since initially entering Iraq in 2003 for Operation Iraqi Freedom, 4,568 American troops have been killed.

McKnight said he saw Risch’s appointment as an opportunity for change, but so far the Republican senator has not been of much help. He has consistently voted against withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria and Iraq. Just last week President Donald Trump vetoed a bipartisan resolution calling for the immediate withdrawal of troops from Yemen; Risch voted against that resolution.

Risch, along with the rest of Idaho’s delegation, is invited to Wednesday’s event, McKnight said. Risch will be unable to attend due to another commitment, according to a statement emailed to the *Statesman*.

“I commend Mr. McKnight for his advocacy of an important issue and commend our men and women who have served, and continue to serve, in harm’s way,” Risch said in the statement. “Most importantly, we need to end all wars as quickly as possible in a responsible, thoughtful manner that safeguards our national security interests, preserves our hard-fought gains, and protects the homeland from those that wish us harm.”

‘FOREVER WARS’ IN THE MIDDLE EAST

While serving in Afghanistan, McKnight said the mission was simple — “to hunt and kill anybody that attacked us on 9/11 ... to hunt, kill and capture anybody who embedded those who attacked us on 9/11. And ... hunt and kill Osama bin Laden,” he said.

But McKnight said he saw things that troubled him. The mission shifted from stopping terrorism and became something different: a never-ending mission in morality and nation building.

“We were building roads, we were building schools, we were building water treatment facilities. We were trying to support a government that was corrupt,” he said. “We were trying to win the hearts and minds rather than going in and killing and destroying our enemies.”

McKnight, who said he holds his service “in a very reverent spot,” is not alone in his desire to bring troops home. In a recent poll of 1,031 service members and veterans conducted by *Smithsonian* magazine, 84 percent said the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq have “been going on too long.”

McKnight said he believes that the United States has an obligation to “spread goodwill.” He does not, however, believe it is the United States’ job to run other countries and “build nations.”

“It’s a very compassionate position to take, to go around the world and fight other people’s wars. As a humanitarian, it makes sense. But we live in a world of limited supplies ... There’s other organizations that can provide the humanitarian aid,” he said.

McKnight said he’s seen the toll that tour after tour has taken on fellow soldiers. Post-traumatic stress disorder, an inability to readjust to society, depression — each eventually rears its ugly head, he said.

McKnight also takes issue with the way troops are deployed. The Authorization to Use Military Force, passed by Congress on Sept. 14, 2001, allows the president “to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on Sept. 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons.” A second act was passed in 2002, applying similar rules to Iraq. Neither requires the approval of Congress.

Prior to that, the War Powers Resolution “(required) that the

President communicate to Congress the committal of troops within 48 hours. Further, the statute requires the President to remove all troops after 60 days if Congress has not granted an extension,” according to the Cornell Legal Information Institute.

McKnight believes that Congress should have a definitive say in waging war — under all circumstances.

“This isn’t an issue of not supporting the troops,” he said. “This is a mission of questioning our foreign policy: Is it fair and is it done right?”

BIPARTISAN ISSUE

Joe Goode has family that served in the military. It was not until he began interacting with McKnight, though, that he realized where he stood on United States foreign policy.

Goode is a senior political science major at Boise State and is the chairman of the Boise State Young Democrats. Until recently, he was admittedly “more of a local and state politics guy.” Then he met McKnight.

Goode said McKnight did not reach out to him to gather an audience for Bring Our Troops Home, but to help the Young Democrats form a community. Over the past month, McKnight has become not only a role model to Goode, but also a friend.

“Dan has been the most authentic and genuine person in trying to form a relationship with our organization,” Goode told the *Statesman* in an email. “Dan’s request was not how our club could help him, but how he could help our club ... I truly appreciate that about him and am grateful for his work to show concern for a bipartisan issue.”

Goode said he thanks McKnight for opening his eyes about the ongoing wars.

“Dan ignited in me a passion to really care and speak out about this important topic,” he said.

“Our veterans deserve better, and some of the realities our troops face when coming home is not fair. If we continue these endless wars, and address these important issues, our spending and cost of innocent lives will continue, and that is upsetting.”

Goode and his counterpart at BSU, Pryce Robinson, chairman of the College Republicans at Boise State, host a show on university radio called “Crossing the Aisle.” It’s not an accident that one of their recent topics has been bringing U.S. troops home.

Robinson did not reply to an interview request for this story.

“There is one topic, one issue,

where the Republicans and Democrats can kind of come together,” McKnight said. “It’s probably the end of war, and I think everyone can kind of get behind that.”

FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION

It’s only about a page in length, but McKnight’s resolution calling for an end to these wars — which he had hoped to get the Idaho Legislature to sign on to — packs a punch. It reads, in part:

“Whereas the United States military has now been fighting in the Middle East over 18 years, more than 7,000 American heroes have given their lives, and more than 52,000 Americans have been wounded.”

“Whereas the United States has spent over \$7 trillion fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen and Syria.”

“Whereas Idaho citizens have grown weary of war and are eager for peace.”

“Therefore be it resolved that the members of the Idaho State Senate and the Idaho House of Representatives ... do hereby call on our Congressional delegation to advocate for and vote in favor of legislation and resolutions that call for the withdrawal of United States troops from the Middle East and ending the war in Afghanistan.”

McKnight has a life outside of Bring Our Troops Home. He was recently married, has children, owns a small business and coaches football at Rocky Mountain High. He has two Labrador retrievers, Johnny Cash and Lexi.

But he’s going to keep devoting all the time he can to this cause. It’s that important to him.

He recalls a letter he received from a supporter — a letter that wasn’t exactly heartwarming.

“I’ve been called ‘naive’ by a gentleman that wrote me a letter of support. He wrote, ‘I support you, but I think you’re naive. I don’t think one man can change this,’” McKnight remembered. “And I agree. I don’t think one guy can. But I responded and said, I might be naive, but I’m also stubborn. And when someone tells me no, I become quite petulant. I’m not afraid to kick in a door, pick up a phone. I’ve called the entire delegation today.”

In McKnight’s mind, there is no final act of this play in which he doesn’t succeed. He’s a soldier who will keep fighting.

“I can’t see just wringing my hands and saying, enough is enough,” he said. “I think this is where I need to be, doing what I need to be doing. And that’s my targeted angle, success.”