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Follow the Constitution, or bring our troops home

By Pat McGeehan

About 1,600 years ago, in the year 410 A.D., barbarian armies underneath King Alaric captured the ancient city of Rome, ransacking and pillaging the center of the Roman Empire. The fall of the once-great capital sent terrifying shockwaves throughout the Western world, triggering Saint Jerome to lament that it was like "the bright light of all the world was put out."

Contrary to popular belief, no climactic battle preceded the fall of Rome.

In fact, for years beforehand, Alaric and his Visigoths had already gone on a rampage up and down the entire Italian Peninsula, ravaging the countryside as they pleased — utterly unchecked and unchallenged.

By the time this band of Gothic ruffians actually arrived at the gates of Rome, it seems that they simply walked into town.

All of this relentless chaos begs the question: Just where exactly were the famous Roman legions to stop them? In one of the curious mysteries of 5th century history, nobody really knows the particulars for sure. But one thing is certainly known: the Roman army was conspicuously missing in action. Decades of waging one expensive war after the next — its forces spread thin across the outposts of a vast frontier — Rome's depleted military started to disintegrate.

Many of these same conceptual conditions that led to the fall of Rome persist here and now in the United States.

Our overextended military, constantly bogged down in new foreign wars, is straining the nation's finances — while at the same time, pushing many of our battle-wearied men and women in uniform to the breaking point. Something has to give.

In an effort to reverse course, for years now, I have introduced a bill in Charleston that would prohibit our state's National Guard units from being sent overseas into combat without an official Declaration of War from Congress.

For just as the Roman civilization experienced a breakdown, so too has our American way of life. Ours does not entail barbarians at the gates, but rather, in a more abstract fashion, the collapse of Constitutional law. And perhaps nowhere is this radical failure in our rule of law more obvious — with more disastrous results — than with the issue of perpetual, institutionalized warfare.



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"Congress shall have power to declare war." One simple line, but a provision our Founding Fathers carefully constructed. This section in the Constitution gives to the legislative branch — not the executive — the exclusive right to decide when this country goes to war and when it does not.

With this war-powers clause, there can be little doubt of our Founders' intentions, for this can be easily understood from their own words.

Of these, none are better than those written by the father of the Constitution himself, President James Madison:

"The Constitution supposes, what the history of all governments demonstrates, that the executive is the branch of power most interested in war, and most prone to it. It has accordingly, with studied care, vested the question of war to the legislature."

Regrettably, it has now been over 75 years since our Congress voted to pass a Declaration of War, and after suffering nearly two decades of endless conflicts — with one president after the next ordering our troops into foreign combat without proper authorization — this essential phrase has more relevance in our country today than perhaps it ever did in the past.

Discarding this Constitutional first principle that helped forge the backbone of our own republic has resulted in grave consequences.

Thousands of American lives have been lost in unnecessary foreign conflicts, devastating our military families while fatiguing our country's defenses — all while draining trillions from the pockets of taxpayers.

In return, what have the American taxpayers actually received from this reckless spending?

Not much more than the backwards reality of financing freshly paved roadways through obscure villages in Afghanistan, while the main streets of their own hometowns are often so decrepit, they look like they belong to the Stone Age — a common fact of life both sad and absurd.

For a nation already trillions of dollars in debt, this staggering level of spending is unsustainable.

We must realize the lessons of history and heed the wisdom of our Founding Fathers, before — as the ancient Romans eventually did — we're forced to learn the hard way.

Next January, I will reintroduce this bipartisan "Defend the Guard" legislation, proposing once again that the National Guard of West Virginia shall not be sent into combat in foreign nations without constitutional authority, just as the Framers intended.

Fellow like-minded lawmakers in other states have now joined me and, in a coordinated manner, will bring this same legislation to their own state capitols across the country — to uphold this constitutional principle as required by their Oath of Office, and to support this effort to Bring Our Troops Home.

If you agree, you can sign my petition at WVBringOurTroopsHome.com.

You can also urge other state delegates and senators to support this bipartisan "Defend the Guard" legislation, which reaffirms our state's authority and demands that the federal government honor our Constitutional rule of law — before bleeding more lives and money from West Virginia into the deserts of foreign conflicts.

Pat McGeehan is a four-term delegate in the West Virginia Legislature who has published numerous books and essays on economics, history and philosophy. A graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy, he has also served as a military intelligence officer. He lives with his daughter, Kennedy, in Chester, West Virginia.