



GOT YOUR SIX

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Strengthening Perceptions of America's Post-9/11 Veterans Survey Analysis Report

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On behalf of Got Your 6, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research conducted an online survey among 1,381 adults nationwide. The survey was conducted between April 22nd and May 6th, 2014 and is representative of the national 18+ adult population per census estimates.

Executive Summary

The collective body of available public opinion research is filled with quantitative data demonstrating the high regard in which the American public holds its veteran population. Indeed, our firm's publicly-released 2012 survey conducted for The Mission Continues showed that 86 percent said military veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are valuable assets to the country. Though undeniably positive, this type of trend often generates a challenge—that is, improving or changing perceptions of an already well-defined and highly popular person or group of people—such as post-9/11 veterans—is an arduous task.

However, this new survey conducted for Got Your 6 reveals a much more nuanced set of dynamics that suggests impressions of post-9/11 veterans are not set in stone. People's views on this matter can be altered and strengthened, and the entertainment industry is a vital driver of this change. Despite the high ratings for veterans, current impressions tend to be somewhat more broad than deep. This is not to say veterans are undefined in the public eye, but rather that there is an openness to accepting new information that belies veterans' current standing.

Perhaps more directly, America's current view of veterans is fundamentally defined by a duality that allows people to see them as concurrently damaged and heroic—a combination that tends

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to produce the result of charity rather than opportunity for continued leadership. As this survey demonstrates, it requires some cognitive dissonance for people to at once say that post-9/11 veterans are more likely to suffer from mental health issues, have substance abuse problems, and be unemployed than average civilians of a similar age, while simultaneously reporting that the same post-9/11 veterans are nearly five times more likely to be a strong leader or valuable community asset than an average comparable civilian. Further, the polar extremes of “damaged” or “hero” represent what respondents to this survey report as the standard depiction of veterans on television and film.

These are the dynamics that set the stage—and illustrate the need—for change. This study set out to gauge the American public’s existing impressions of post-9/11 veterans and to establish a baseline for future tracking of key measures. It was also designed to test the hypothesis that the entertainment industry can help in the effort to create a new generation of American leaders by moving beyond the traditional definitions that tend to force veterans into one of two extremes—“heroes” or “charity cases”—and adopting a new, more compelling, and more authentic way of writing post-9/11 veterans into their content.

The answer is clear in several central findings that illustrate that presenting post-9/11 veterans in a more neutral, “Asset” frame has benefits for the community, for veterans, and for the entertainment industry itself:

- 1. Portraying post-9/11 veterans as civic assets who contribute to their communities is very compelling and changes people’s impressions significantly.** This more “neutral” representation that depicts veterans as skilled leaders and community assets elicits an incredibly favorable response from people, moving them in a positive direction—and in real numbers—on virtually every measure tested in the poll. In many cases, the “Asset” characterization produces an even better result than portraying veterans as heroic. It also begins to reorient the way people think about how best to “thank” veterans returning from service by shifting the focus from charity to opportunity.
- 2. Moreover, this is the most believable characterization.** The “Asset” framework most closely correlates to what people already believe to be true about post-9/11 veterans. This depiction is far more effective than the “Hero” frame at influencing people to believe that the way post-9/11 veterans are portrayed on television and film is accurate. The Asset frame has the potential to lend even greater credibility to the characters that Hollywood creates.
- 3. The entertainment industry is uniquely positioned to create positive change on perceptions of post-9/11 veterans.** People self-report that the entertainment industry has an outsized impact on the way they think of veterans. However, more people believe the current portrayal of veterans on television and film is more negative than positive. However, once people see television clips showing the Asset frame, they come away with a very positive reaction.

Ultimately, creating this change will not be easy or come quickly, facing challenges beyond the structural hurdles of shifting national opinion. The study shows that people accept and like the Asset frame, but it is a much more subtle approach to talking about post-9/11 veterans. It is also rare in the current dialogue and in no way yet ingrained with the public, making the starting point somewhere close to square one.

The following report will provide further detail on these core concepts. It will first examine the existing views of post-9/11 veterans held by the American public, and then move from this starting point into how the entertainment industry can use the Asset framework to help strengthen the post-9/11 veteran brand.

Key Findings

Existing Perceptions of Veterans

Initial perceptions of veterans are more generic and literal than suggested by the overwhelmingly positive favorability ratings they often receive in outside research. This does not mean that veterans are undefined in the public eye; rather, it suggests a certain lack of depth to that definition. More importantly, it connotes an openness among people to having their impressions of veterans altered. When asked at the outset of this survey to describe in an open-ended fashion what they think of when they hear the term “veteran,” 85 percent of people gave a response that fell within the very general, neutral framework of someone who has “served in or retired from the military” or “fought for or defended the country.” When asked to describe a post-9/11 veteran specifically, only one in ten gave a clearly positive response (brave, heroic, strong, made a sacrifice) and just 13 percent said something negative (PTSD, struggling).

People are certainly not uninformed about veterans, but this data indicates that their immediate default position is neither to “hero” nor “damaged.” This helps open the door to changing impressions, despite the fact that people are already very familiar with veterans.

But people know a veteran when they see one, and the reaction to imagery of veterans is incredibly telling in terms of the way people “see” veterans. This study began with an exercise in which respondents were shown three images of men very similar in physical characteristics but very different in terms of implied station in life—one who was clearly white collar, one blue collar, and one who appears homeless. Respondents were then asked to assign a list of 17 traits to each picture according to whether the trait fit the image. Not all traits are listed in the chart on the following page, but this exercise results in two stunning findings:

1. People believe that a man who 87 percent think is homeless (and not wearing military dress or paraphernalia) is actually more likely to be a veteran than to have a mental health issue or a criminal past.
2. The families of veterans and veterans themselves are not immune to this reaction—people living in a household with a veteran were more likely (52 percent) to think the homeless man image is a veteran than the total population (46 percent).

Figure 1: Trait-Imagery Exercise, Percent Responding Yes (the trait fits the image)



And, misinformation about veterans abounds. The figure that follows below highlights the results of an exercise in which respondents were given a series of statements about veterans and asked to judge each one true or false. On essentially all of these issues, Americans believe that veterans are more likely to carry negative attributes than an average civilian, in opposition to reality. The lone exception is that people believe veterans are more likely to keep a job and advance in their career than their civilian counterparts, which speaks to the notion that once given the opportunity, veterans have an important set of skills and qualities that help them continue to contribute and succeed.

The biggest misconception comes on the issue of mental health—more than 8 in 10 believe post-9/11 veterans are more likely to suffer from mental health issues than a comparable civilian. This represents a primary challenge, given the causal relationship between mental health and the other characteristics tested in this battery.

Importantly, most of this misinformation falls into the category of conjecture—people are *inclined* to believe it, but it has not become hardened “fact.” That is, the vast majority of people who believe these myths do so with a high degree of uncertainty—many more report that this is their “best guess” rather than being “certain” of each statement. This makes countering these untruths not only an important step in changing perceptions of veterans, but also an achievable one.

■ **Figure 2:** True-False Battery, Percent Responding

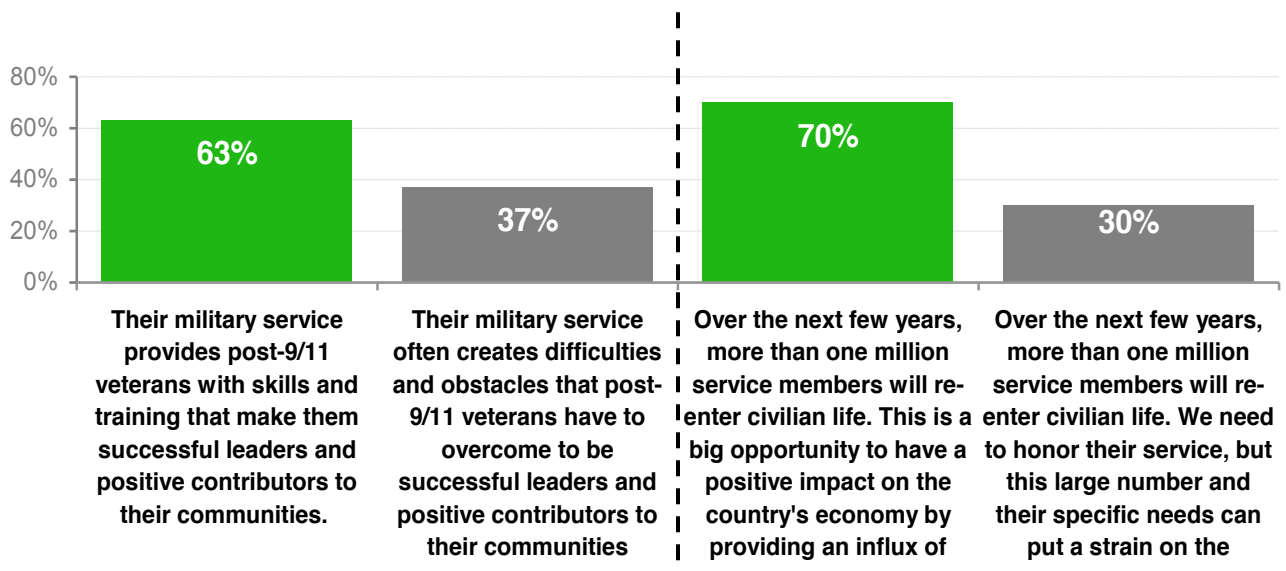
	True, Certain	True, Best Guess	False, Best Guess	False, Certain	True - False	Reality
Post-9/11 veterans are more likely to suffer from mental health issues than average civilians of a similar age	23	59	15	2	83-17	FALSE
Post-9/11 veterans commit suicide at higher rates than average civilians of a similar age	20	55	22	3	75-25	FALSE
Post-9/11 veterans have higher rates of substance abuse than average civilians of a similar age	11	50	35	4	61-39	FALSE
Post-9/11 veterans are more likely to be unemployed than average civilians of a similar age	12	48	37	3	60-40	FALSE
Post-9/11 veterans make more money than average civilians of a similar age	5	21	62	12	26-74	TRUE
Post-9/11 veterans are more likely to have a stable family life than average civilians of a similar age	6	27	61	6	33-67	TRUE
Post-9/11 veterans are less likely to be homeless than average civilians of a similar age	8	29	54	8	38-62	TRUE
Post-9/11 veterans stay at their jobs longer and get promoted more quickly than average civilians of a similar age	9	42	46	3	51-49	TRUE

Please read the following statements about post-9/11 veterans. From what you know, please indicate whether you believe each statement is true or false, and how certain you are about your answer.

Veterans and their families are no more likely to reject this misinformation than the general public—their responses on these true-false items do not vary greatly from the overall data in the chart above. And education level has no impact either; in fact, college-educated people were slightly *more* likely to accept these falsehoods than those without a college degree. In a sign that things may already be shifting on these measures, the younger people are, the more likely they are to reject the myths.

Despite the misinformation, the pros of military service outweigh the cons. People clearly believe that post-9/11 veterans positively influence the country and their community. First, several core forced-choice statement pairs show that people believe the net impact of service is more beneficial than detrimental to both veterans and their communities by wide margins.

■ **Figure 3:** Statement Pairs, Percent Responding



"For each pair of statements (above), please indicate which statement you agree with more, even if neither one is exactly right."

Secondly, Americans report that post-9/11 veterans' service makes them a bigger asset than their civilian counterparts. Strong leadership is the quality most associated with veterans—44 percent say a post-9/11 veteran is more likely to be a strong leader than their civilian counterpart, while no other trait breaks a third of the population in terms of those saying it better describes a post-9/11 veteran.

It must be noted that a plurality actually tends to associate each of the traits in the table below with a post-9/11 veteran and a comparable civilian equally, which is not necessarily a negative finding as it indicates a level of normalcy.

■ **Figure 4:** Comparative Imagery, Percent Responding

	Post-9/11 Veteran Better	Both	Civilian Better	Veteran: Civilian Ratio
Is a strong leader	44	47	9	4.9
Is a valuable asset to their community	32	61	7	4.6
Has good values	30	64	6	5.0
Has a positive impact on their community	31	60	9	3.4
Is a leader in their community	32	57	11	2.9
Has a negative impact on their community	11	68	19	0.6
Is not a valuable asset to their community	13	67	19	0.7

The following is a list of characteristics and traits that might be used to describe people. For each characteristic, please indicate whether it better describes a post-9/11 veteran, or an average civilian of the same age who did not serve in the military by checking ONE of the boxes.

The subgroups most predisposed to currently accepting the “Asset” frame of post-9/11 veterans tend to be men, seniors, and lower-income Americans.

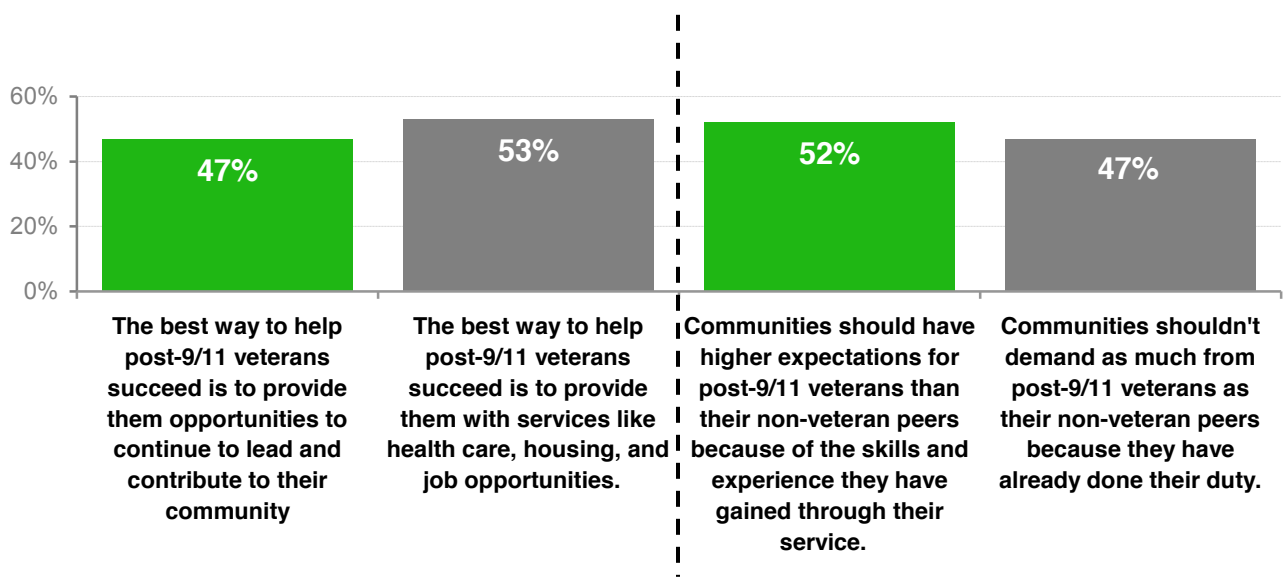
The net result is a deep cognitive dissonance about post-9/11 veterans, in which people view them as “damaged leaders.” This dichotomy is at the heart of the way people perceive veterans, and almost all findings from this survey on the public’s current impressions of post-9/11 veterans fit into this frame in one way or another. This dynamic is clear in all of the information described thus far in this report—veterans are at once viewed as struggling with mental health issues and its resulting problems, while simultaneously seen as stronger leaders and more valuable assets to their community than comparable civilians.

There is additional evidence in the survey that further drives home this point. In an exercise where respondents were asked to use a 0 to 100 scale to rate how well each of a list traits describes a post-9/11 veteran (100 meaning extremely well and 0 meaning not well at all), the following dualities emerge:

- The mean score for the trait that post-9/11 veterans are “role models for children” is 59, while the mean score for “likely to suffer from PTSD” is a nearly-equal 54;
- The mean score for “has a college education” is 44, while the mean score for “is unemployed” is 41;
- The mean score for “is a small business owner” is 32, while the mean score for “is homeless” is 30.

It is of course natural for people to associate damage from war with the “Hero” frame of veterans—they sacrificed part of themselves to defend the country. This results in a tilt to wanting to reward veterans with charity and reprieve rather than opportunity and challenge. People are largely split on the following two forced-choice statement pairs, which can be viewed in one of two ways. On the one hand, people see tend to see post-9/11 veterans as assets in the ways described above, yet only a minority believes the best way to support them upon their return is to give them opportunities to contribute. On the other, the fact that almost 50 percent or more choose the opportunity/challenge side of these debates is quite positive, given that the broader media, political, and cultural dialogue and policy agenda tends to skew toward the charity frame.

Figure 5: Statement Pairs, Percent Responding



“For each pair of statements (above), please indicate which statement you agree with more, even if neither one is exactly right.”

The Role and Impact of the Entertainment Industry

The entertainment industry is highly influential on people’s views of post-9/11 veterans, underscoring their openness to accepting what they are shown in film and on television.

Nearly half the population (48 percent) reports that the entertainment industry has a very big impact on the way people perceive veterans (choose 8, 9 or 10 on a 10-point scale where 10 represents the entertainment having a very significant impact on views of veterans). This is a particularly positive response in a world where people are generally resistant to admitting they are influenced by anything other than their own intelligence.

But people think veterans are portrayed more negatively than positively by the entertainment industry. Further, there is absolutely no recognition of the Asset frame in current television or film. When asked specifically how veterans are portrayed on television or in movies, more people (50 percent) say something negative than positive (41 percent), represented in the graphic below. The good news is that among the people who think the

entertainment industry has the biggest impact on perceptions of veterans (scoring 10 on the scale above), the positive-negative gap shrinks significantly, to 46 percent negative and 43 percent positive.

This graphic also makes a very clear point that there are really only two types of portrayals of post-9/11 veterans that line up directly with the dichotomy described earlier in this report—people see them on TV or in film as either heroes or as damaged and struggling.

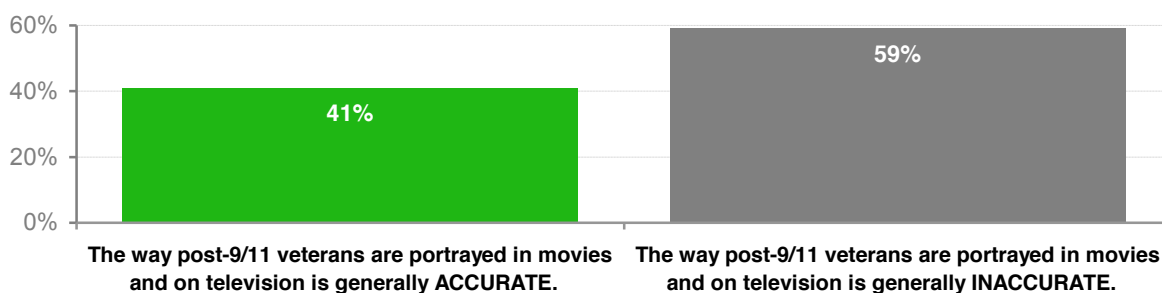
■ **Figure 6:** Open-Ended Word Cloud



“Please describe the ways post-9/11 veterans are most often portrayed on television shows or in movies.”

The American public questions the veracity of the way post-9/11 veterans are depicted on TV and in film, as shown in the figure below. Moreover, the “inaccurate” viewpoint is more closely associated with the negative portrayal while the “accurate” side is more correlated with a positive view of how post-9/11 veterans are shown by the entertainment industry. That is, among those who think the portrayals are inaccurate, 57 percent responded with something negative and 34 percent something positive to the question above; among those who think the portrayals are accurate, the inverse is true (51 percent positive; 41 percent negative).

■ **Figure 7:** Statement Pair, Percent Responding



The Net Effect

The ultimate goal of this survey was to understand whether introducing an “Asset” characterization of post-9/11 veterans could generate movement on some of these core measures and help shift public opinion on veterans. **The answer is a resounding yes.**

The Experiment. After hearing the questions about post-9/11 veterans already outlined in this report, respondents were then divided into thirds, each with the same demographic characteristics. Each third was then shown a distinct clip montage from various television shows. Respondents were then asked to assess the clips they saw for impact on their perceptions of post-9/11 veterans, including a re-ask of many of the pre-video questions. The clip montages were:

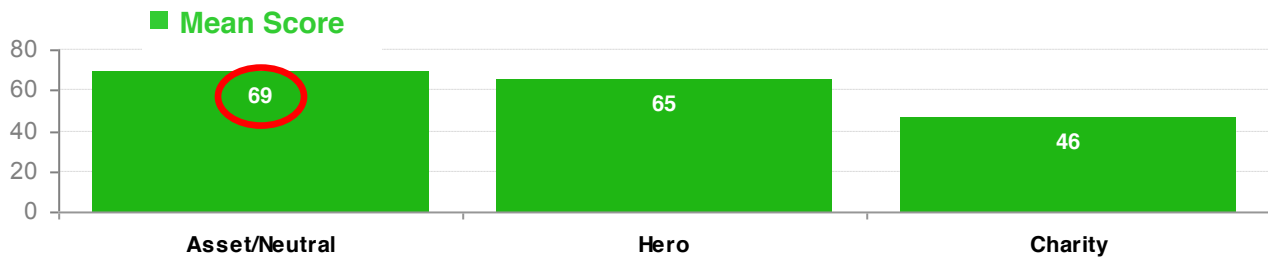
- Charity: Depicts veterans as struggling to readjust to society, with mental health issues, substance abuse issues, etc.
- Asset: Depicts veterans as average community leaders, making a positive contribution to society based on their experience and skills learned in the military
- Hero: Celebrates veterans as conquering heroes, returning from duty to parades, awards, ceremonies, etc.

Several important findings emerge from this exercise, each of which will be discussed in greater detail below:

- Portraying post-9/11 veterans as Assets has a measurable and significant impact on improving impressions of them.
- In many cases, the Asset framework outperforms even showing post-9/11 veterans as Heroes. However, the results on this comparison tend to be somewhat mixed based on which measure is analyzed, and the most appropriate internal conclusion is that the Asset frame produces as good if not a better response than the Hero frame.
 - However, the Asset frame produces a better result in pushing back on the notion of “charity” and leading people to conclude that the best way to honor the service of post-9/11 veterans is through giving them continued opportunities to lead.
- Further, the Asset frame is significantly more credible and believable than the Hero portrayal.
- Depicting post-9/11 veterans on television or in film as struggling does real damage to the way the public sees them.

The Asset frame generates the biggest impact on changing people’s views of veterans in a positive way. After watching the clips, 29 percent of the people who saw the Asset version said the video gave them a “new idea or feeling toward post-9/11 veterans,” while only 22 percent of those who saw the Hero clip montage said the same. And, the following chart shows that those who saw the Asset clips were the most likely to say it made them feel more positively toward post-9/11 veterans.

Figure 8: Positive Response to Video Clips, Mean Score



Please indicate on a scale from 0 to 100, how much more positively does this video make you feel toward post-9/11 veterans? 100 means the video makes you feel much more positively toward post-9/11 veterans and 0 means it does not make you feel any more positively toward post-9/11 veterans.

The Charity montage actually has the largest impact on perceptions of veterans, with 40 percent saying it gave them a new way of thinking about post-9/11 vets. However, as shown above, the Charity montage elicits a much less positive response than Asset or Hero—in fact, more people who saw the Charity clips gave it a score lower than 50 than above 50 on the scale above.

The Asset portrayal is also the most credible. Respondents were asked both before and after seeing the clip montages whether they think the way post-9/11 veterans are portrayed on television is accurate or inaccurate. The table below shows that those who saw the Asset clips were significantly more likely to shift toward thinking veterans are portrayed accurately than those who saw the other clip montages.

Figure 9: Shift on Accuracy Statement Pair, Percent Responding 1st Statement Better – 2nd Statement Better

	Clip Montage	Initial (1 st – 2 nd)	Final (1 st – 2 nd)	NET Shift
The way post-9/11 veterans are portrayed in movies and on television is generally accurate.	Charity	37-63	44-56	+15
	Asset	42-58	57-43	+31
The way post-9/11 veterans are portrayed in movies and on television is generally inaccurate.	Hero	45-55	53-47	+16

The Asset framework creates positive movement on core questions. On virtually every measure asked after having been shown the video clips, those who saw the Asset frame moved toward a more positive impression of post-9/11 veterans in significant numbers. The following two tables highlight these shifts and some key points:

- The Asset frame outperforms the Hero frame when it comes to providing post-9/11 veterans with opportunity rather than charity.

- The Charity frame produces a negative result in all cases.

Figure 10: Net Shift, Percent Responding 1st Statement Better – 2nd Statement Better

	Asset	Hero	Charity
Over the next few years, more than one million service members will re-enter civilian life. This is a big opportunity to have a positive impact on the country's economy by providing an influx of skilled leaders.	+16	+7	-22
Over the next few years, more than one million service members will re-enter civilian life. We need to honor their service, but this large number and their specific needs can put a strain on the country's economy.			
Communities should have higher expectations for post-9/11 veterans than their non-veteran peers because of the skills and experience they have gained through their service.	+11	-1	-9
Communities shouldn't demand as much from post-9/11 veterans as their non-veteran peers because they have already done their duty. Their military service provides post-9/11 veterans with skills and training that make them successful leaders and positive contributors to their communities.	+6	+17	-16
Their military service often creates difficulties and obstacles that post-9/11 veterans have to overcome to be successful leaders and positive contributors to their communities.			
The best way to help post-9/11 veterans succeed is to provide them opportunities to continue to lead and contribute to their community.	+4	-5	-16
The best way to help post-9/11 veterans succeed is to provide them with services like health care, housing, and job opportunities.			

Figure 11: Net Shift on Comparative Imagery, Percent Responding Veteran Better – Civilian Better

	Asset	Hero	Charity
Is a strong leader	+12	+10	-17
Is a valuable asset to their community	+14	+14	-14
Has good values	+15	+6	-9
Has a positive impact on their community	+10	+11	-12
Is a leader in their community	+8	+15	-16
Has a negative impact on their community	-2	-1	+19
Is not a valuable asset to their community	+4	+3	+13

The subgroups that tend to move the most on the key measures after seeing the Asset clips tend to be:

- Men
- Age 50+
- Higher income Americans

The post-video open-ended responses tell an important story: Both the Asset and Hero frames can have a real impact on improving perceptions of post-9/11 veterans, but they accomplish it in different ways. The Hero frame produces a slightly more positive result in this exercise overall—60 percent said the Hero video impacted them in a positive way versus 41 percent of those who saw the Asset clips. The Hero responses focus almost exclusively on the ideals of sacrifice, bravery, and respect, while the Asset clips produced a response much more aligned with this new framework (gained skills from service, valuable members of the community, doing well, etc). While this is not surprising, it is telling and says that the Asset message—while not nearly as overt as the Hero frame—can sink in with people.

It is difficult to change opinions on more tangible measures—the myths are hard to dispel. But, while the Asset and Hero frameworks have at least a minor impact on helping counter the misinformation about post-9/11 veterans, the Charity frame does damage by lending power to these misbeliefs. The following table indicates less movement on these measures than on those shown above, though the trends here tend to point in a positive direction for the Asset and Hero frames.

■ **Figure 12:** Shift on True-False, Percent Responding “True”

	Asset	Hero	Charity
Post-9/11 veterans are more likely to suffer from mental health issues than average civilians of a similar age	-3	-3	+2
Post-9/11 veterans commit suicide at higher rates than average civilians of a similar age	-3	-3	+7
Post-9/11 veterans have higher rates of substance abuse than average civilians of a similar age	-1	-4	+23
Post-9/11 veterans are more likely to be unemployed than average civilians of a similar age	+2	-1	+10
Post-9/11 veterans make more money than average civilians of a similar age	+6	+8	-1
Post-9/11 veterans are more likely to have a stable family life than average civilians of a similar age	+5	+8	-9
Post-9/11 veterans are less likely to be homeless than average civilians of a similar age	+3	+1	+4
Post-9/11 veterans stay at their jobs longer and get promoted more quickly than average civilians of a similar age	+7	+8	-14

Please read the following statements about post-9/11 veterans. From what you know, please indicate whether you believe each statement is true or false, and how certain you are about your answer.

Conclusion

This study set out to prove that portraying post-9/11 veterans as community assets and leaders on television and in film is a powerful way to improve overall perceptions of them. The results represent proof of concept.

People today support the troops and view veterans overwhelmingly favorably, but the 40 years since the end of the Vietnam War have proven that these views are not static. This is not to say that we should expect a regression in the positive opinions of veterans—it simply reflects that the public is open to having their impressions altered.

Not only does portraying veterans in a more neutral, asset-based role on television and film strengthen impressions of veterans and represent the most credible approach, it also holds the potential to engage the public in a new conversation about supporting returning veterans through opportunity rather than charity.