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Why America's Veterans Deserve Nutritional Education, Not Just Compensation: The Nutritional Crisis We Can't Ignore

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(PHOTO: ERIC GANG)

I stand today at a crossroads, believing that how we eat cannot be separated from who we become and that our nation is paying the price for neglecting both nutrition and those who have served.

Across America, chronic health conditions, such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular disease, are not just medical issues; they are national vulnerabilities. Among veterans, the burden is especially heavy. According to [analysis](#), chronic diseases significantly impact a disproportionate number of veterans in the United States, leading to substantial long-term health issues. Veterans are more likely than the general public to suffer from obesity, heart disease, and other diet-related illnesses. According to data from the U.S. [Centers for Disease Control](#), 64% of female veterans and 76.1% of male veterans are classified as overweight or obese. In addition, food insecurity is more prevalent among veterans than in the general population, with rates ranging from [6% to 24%](#).

As someone who works with veterans, advocating for them, guiding them in their transition to civilian life, and pushing for systemic reforms, I see every day how the issue of diet is swept aside under the heavier banners of disability compensation, mental health, and medical management. But that omission is a mistake. Because diet, health, and national readiness are bound up together, and ignoring that truth endangers us all.

Let me be clear: we are not just talking about calories or fad diets. We are talking about the cultural, emotional, and educational walls that separate people from evidence-based nutrition. Food is identity, ritual, family, comfort. Asking people to abandon their food traditions feels like asking them to abandon themselves. So the resistance is real. Most people are not trained in statistical literacy; they read headlines, not research papers. We need to be more comfortable trusting nutritional epidemiology, rather than social media influencers, who dismiss it as being non-causative. And so the field of nutrition, where science often upends tradition, becomes a battleground of beliefs rather than of facts.

That separation between culture and nutrition is deeply dangerous, especially when it intersects with military readiness. [Data estimates](#) that nearly 77% of Americans ages 17 to 24 are not qualified for military service without a waiver, often due to weight, health, or physical issues. Another [study](#) put the figure more directly: only 23% of that age group meet baseline eligibility criteria without a waiver. That means the pool from which we draw our defenders is shrinking, not solely because people don't want to serve, but because their bodies and their health no longer permit them to.

This is not simply a recruitment challenge. This is a state security issue. If too few citizens are physically and medically qualified to defend the country, we weaken the foundations of defense. Moreover, when veterans finish their service, they often walk into a healthcare system and a food environment that gives them no guidance on healthy eating despite their heightened health risks. Many veterans deal with intense stressors, including [PTSD and depression](#), leading to weight gain. If their dietary foundation is weak, those forces accelerate decline.

Compensation matters. But compensation does not repair arteries, reverse metabolic damage, or instill lifelong habits. We need, instead, a major cultural shift in policy: nutrition education embedded in military training and post-service transitions, national public health campaigns on diet, and epidemiological evidence leveraged in policy just as tobacco education was decades ago.

We already know diet matters. A large-scale [study](#) of veterans found that adherence to healthy lifestyle factors (diet quality, exercise, not smoking, moderate alcohol, and good sleep) correlated with significantly lower mortality and increased longevity. Other [research](#) shows that veterans' diets, as measured by the Healthy Eating Index, could be improved significantly. On average, they consume more "empty" calories and solid fats than they should.

I believe we must treat nutrition not as a personal hobby but as a public infrastructure. Just as we built highway systems, water systems, and vaccine campaigns, we must build food systems literacy into schools, into military training, and into veterans' services. Our government, at every level, has a role. We must fund epidemiological research on diet, deploy public education as we once did on tobacco and seatbelts, and integrate nutritional science into VA clinics and military mess halls.

We must give veterans the tools to heal their bodies, not just treat symptoms. I have met veterans whose lives I believe should still exist, but whose cardiovascular disease, diabetes, liver disease, or strokes were hastened by years of poor diet that began in uniform mess halls and continued untreated long after. These are among the people I fight for.

Let tradition be informed by evidence, not locked behind denial. Let us not worship our meals more than we care for our bodies. Let us teach literal statistical thinking to ordinary people, so they understand risk, correlation, and causation, and thus believe that what happens on their plate is part of their legacy.

Because in the end, the burden falls not just on veterans, but on all of us. Healthcare costs, lost productivity, diminished life quality, these are shared burdens. But most importantly, the readiness of our military, the vitality of our citizenry, and the honor owed to those who sacrificed demand we do better.

How we eat cannot be separated from who we are. We are at a critical junction. If we act now, embedding nutritional education in military and veteran systems, teaching statistical literacy across society, and aligning policy with evidence, we can begin to reverse the tide. We can rediscover a national strength not merely of arms but of bodies and minds. And we can ensure that those who served us are sustained by what we eat, not consumed by what we ignore.

About the Author

Eric Gang is an advocate for veterans, an author, and a public health proponent. He works directly with veterans to secure benefits, guide their post-service transitions, and promote long-term wellness. His writing and advocacy focus on the intersections of nutrition, military readiness, and public policy, and he draws from both personal experience and research to push for systemic change.

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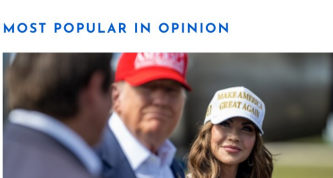
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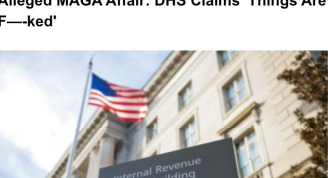
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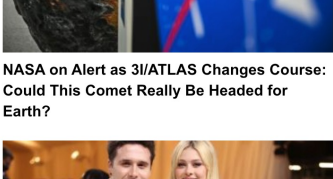
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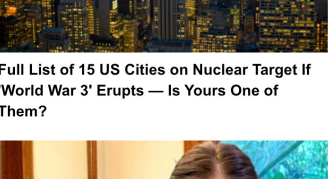
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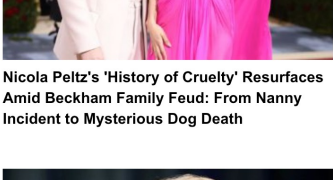
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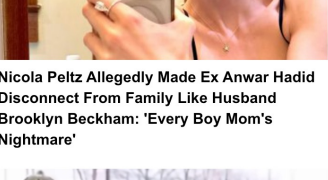
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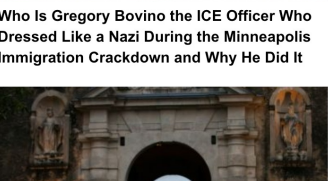
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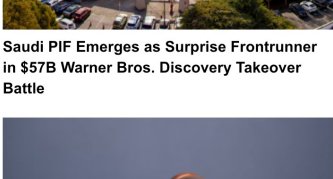
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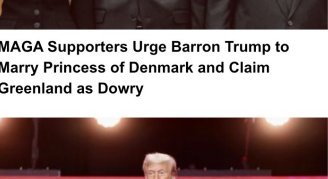
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