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EDITORIAL

Fallen soldiers command respect

BY THE HONOLULU STAR-ADVERTISER

America reserves the last Monday of May to honor its fallen soldiers, the men and women in uniform who take duty to country to its most extreme, unforgiving conclusion. Each Memorial Day presents an opportunity to break from daily routine and reflect on the great sacrifice these warriors make, what they gave to grant freedoms to those at home. For many it is a solemn day, and also one of hopeful reverie. But this year feels different.

America is once again at war in a region half a world away, though anything but foreign to our troops. Soldiers are embroiled in a Middle East fight being waged from the White House under guise of national security, ordered into battle by an administration with isolationist tendencies that vowed off armed conflict, but has recently capitalized on military acts of force. And from the look of things, more is to come.

After a monthslong oil blockade, the U.S. indicted former Cuban President Raul Castro on Wednesday in the 1996 downing of planes flown by Miami-based exiles, setting the stage for a regime-change intervention that bears hallmarks of January's Venezuelan campaign, which ended with the capture of Nicolas Maduro.

Where past presidents plied diplomacy, soft power and the might of America's economy to great effect in their international dealings, Donald Trump seems unafraid to expend resources — hardware and human — in service of equivalent goals. No matter how successful an operation, how well-planned a strategy, the law of numbers wins out and casualties mount.

At least 15 service members have paid the ultimate price in Iran, seven killed by enemy fire. Not much has been said of the war dead. Typically, and rightly, war fatalities grab headlines, the fallen are feted as heroes and their sacrifice is reported in depth, sometimes over multiple news cycles. But these are not normal times. Media outlets are on a daily basis bombarded by political intrigue, major shifts in government policy, reminders of economic strife and threats to the social status quo.

For his part, Trump generally handles the American death toll with appropriate reverence, as he should. But during the March 7 dignified transfer of U.S. Army Reserve soldier Sgt. 1st Class Nicole Amor, who was killed by a drone strike in Kuwait, the commander in chief was criticized for saluting in a white baseball cap emblazoned with "USA" in gold lettering. Not the somber respect fallen soldiers deserve.

Worthy of the same esteem are service members who take their own life. Self-inflicted deaths are disproportionately represented in official casualty counts, with 471 tallied in 2024 alone, according to Department of Defense statistics released in March.

While the DOD has drawn down accidental deaths to 230 last year from more than 1,500 in 1980, suicide numbers have held steady, cumulatively accounting for a far higher mortality rate than did enemy action over the past 45 years, a separate accounting from the Defense Casualty Analysis System shows.

Given the rigors of their occupation, and other factors such as enlistment demographics, soldier suicides are expected, but it is clear that more must be done to provide adequate mental health resources to active-duty personnel — 400 to 500 self-inflicted fatalities per year is unacceptable.

This Memorial Day, Americans must utilize their freedoms to speak out and take action in support of what they believe is right, against what is wrong and always for their fellow man. Doing so is a fitting honor to the fallen who forfeited life to protect the sanctity of those liberties.

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Protect REAP, a federal program rural Kentucky can't afford to lose

BY JOSH BILLS

Over the past several decades, rural Kentucky has faced significant changes. In Eastern Kentucky, a shrinking tax base, population loss, and the decline of long-standing industries has made resilience an ever-changing challenge. Through it all, our communities have adapted and searched for new ways to build a stronger, more diverse economy.

Increasingly, a new crisis has emerged: the soaring cost of keeping the lights on. For small businesses and farms that are essential to our local economy, electric rates for commercial facilities have more than doubled over the last 20 years. When you layer in historic inflation, the math becomes overwhelming. Overhead costs eat away at already thin margins, forcing owners to choose between a new hire, a new piece of equipment, or simply paying the utility bill.

At Mountain Association, we have been supporting small businesses since 1976 and saw this energy crisis coming early. In 2008, as costs began their steep climb, we launched an energy savings program. Through this work we continually see one of the biggest challenges facing businesses is upfront capital.

That's where the Rural Energy for America Program—REAP, for short—comes in. REAP is a federal program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture that provides guaranteed loan financing and grant funding to agricultural producers and rural small businesses for renewable energy systems or energy efficiency

improvements. For a rural small business owner, that means a grant can cover up to 25% of the cost of solar, a more efficient HVAC system, LED lighting, or better insulation. These are the kinds of upgrades that pay for themselves in a short time, reducing overhead and improving the bottom line. But for many, the upfront cost is simply out of reach.

At Mountain Association, we have been packaging REAP grants for our clients since 2009. To date, our team has secured more than 60 REAP grants for small businesses and farms across Eastern Kentucky, totaling over \$2.5 million for our clients. These energy savings projects keep rural businesses open and competitive. As a bonus, many of the projects are completed by local contractors, allowing those federal investments to go even further in supporting Eastern Kentucky's economy. Without support from programs like REAP, some of the businesses and farms we work with simply won't make it as costs continue to rise.

Mike Long is the general manager of Long's Pic Pac in Pineville, a town of about 1,630 people in Southeastern Kentucky. His father started the business in 1964 with a \$3,500 loan. Today, Mike is fighting to keep it the grocery store of choice for a community where the median household income is just \$27,159. Grocery stores typically run on a razor-thin 2.2% profit margin. One bad year or one season of sky-high demand charges and a rural store can vanish.

For Long's Pic Pac, a REAP grant funded 40% of a project to install solar panels on the store's

roof and a 60-kW battery. The battery can store excess solar energy and vastly reduce the punishing "demand charges" that make up more than half of the grocery's monthly power bill. The result is an estimated cost savings of at least \$15,000 per year—money that can go to staffing the deli, offsetting delivery costs, or simply keeping prices stable for families in Pineville. Long expects to pay back the entire cost of the project in just four years.

The need for this program has never been more urgent. With each devastating flood or winter storm, utility companies are forced to make expensive repairs to aging infrastructure. Businesses and ratepayers pay for those repairs through higher rates. As the frequency and intensity of these storms increase, utilities will continue passing those recovery costs back to us. For a business like Long's Pic Pac living on a 2.2% margin, this compounding cycle of damage, recovery, and rate hikes is a threat to its existence.

REAP is a proven, efficient tool that uses modest federal investment to unlock private capital and lower operating costs. But it only works if it is funded and protected. It isn't just an energy policy. It is the difference between closing the doors and keeping the lights on.

Josh Bills is the Senior Energy Analyst at the Mountain Association. He can be reached at josh@mtassociation.org.

This commentary was originally published by the Kentucky Lantern, a nonprofit news site covering state government and politics, at kentuckylantern.com.

How to turn the boomer retirement wave into a generational opportunity

BY JASON BAILEY

The soldiers returning from victory in World War II launched a new era of American optimism. The country was united and the economy was strong. With the help of the G.I. bill, these veterans got jobs, bought homes and started families in record numbers. The resulting baby boom is the largest generation in U.S. history.

This year the youngest baby boomers turn 62, the earliest age they can begin collecting Social Security. The "silver tsunami" of boomer aging means one in five Kentuckians will be over age 65 by 2030. The percentage above 80 will nearly double by 2040.

As a result, Kentucky deaths now exceed births for the first time in recorded history. A declining fertility rate is also contributing to this reversal. Cultural changes combined with stagnant wages and the rising costs of housing and childcare are bringing birth rates down.

These demographic realities are altering everything about our lives and economy. Nearly all recent job growth in Kentucky is in healthcare as demand rises from a swelling senior population. Workers with children of their own are struggling with "sandwich generation"

stress. An aging population will mean a smaller labor force, dampening economic growth. In Kentucky as elsewhere, immigration from other countries has been key to preventing the workforce from shrinking further.

The state is unprepared for what is coming, and care in boomers' final years may be the biggest concern. Without assets and support and facing skyrocketing medical bills and unaffordable housing costs, many seniors will be forced into Medicaid-funded nursing homes at a state cost of up to \$100,000 a year. That will further strain a Medicaid program already facing huge federal cuts from the One Big Beautiful Bill Act. The General Assembly is also cutting Medicaid as it struggles with a smaller budget from state income tax reductions.

The issue is serious, but every crisis is an opportunity. In this case, we could address multiple problems at once and honor our seniors, create good jobs and help restore a hopeful spirit in a new generation.

Kentuckians have a strong sense of place, and aging retirees overwhelmingly prefer to stay at home. That option is also much cheaper than nursing facilities. But while most other states are shifting

the vast majority of their Medicaid long-term care dollars to home and community-based services, Kentucky maintains an emphasis on politically powerful nursing homes.

We could shift more dollars to home care and pair that with a commitment to quality. Care jobs are among the fastest growing in Kentucky but pay is very low. Home health and personal care aides start at just \$25,080 a year on average. Poor salaries and high turnover also affect the care the elderly receive. An increased state investment in Medicaid home care paired with unionization and training would be a win-win of better jobs and better services. These programs also allow family members to devote more time to care and receive pay for doing so, thereby strengthening lifelong bonds and ensuring loving care.

And there's a third essential piece of this strategy: affordable homes and apartments for the elderly to live in. Kentucky has a severe housing shortage, and rising prices will push more fixed income seniors from their residences. Keeping them out of expensive nursing facilities is yet another economic reason for a massive public investment in affordable housing. We

should build more small and accessible units that are suited for seniors and thereby free up existing dwellings for families with kids. And as with home health, we can make those construction jobs high quality, in this case by re-applying prevailing wage laws to publicly funded projects.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor and the horrors of Nazi Germany shook the country. The baby boomers were the product of a nation coming together. We can do that again in their final years. In the process, we would create good employment for workers in the care and construction industries. And as those boomers pass away, the large supply of housing they called home — including dwellings built under this initiative — become a legacy that future residents can afford.

This story began with the World War II vets we called the Greatest Generation. The best way to remember them is for the next wave of Kentuckians to have a chance at greatness too.

Jason Bailey is executive director of the Kentucky Center for Economic Policy, www.kypolicy.org. This commentary was originally published by the Kentucky Lantern, a nonprofit news site covering state government and politics, at kentuckylantern.com.