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**Subject:** Editorial by National Commander Charles E. Schmidt: Country Over Candidates  
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*Note: The following op-ed by National Commander Charles E. Schmidt was published by the Waco Tribune on October 21.*

*Editor – The following guest editorial by the national commander of The American Legion is offered for your consideration.*

## **Country Over Candidates**

**By Charles E. Schmidt**

As leader of the nation's largest veterans service organization, I am frequently asked who The American Legion is supporting in this year's presidential election. My answer is simple. "Veterans." And by that answer I am not referring to a candidate's military service (or lack thereof) but to his or her proposals on issues such as VA health care, a strong national defense and border security.

Sometimes, if the questioner is unaware of our nonpartisanship, a follow-up is asked along the lines of "who does the Legion *really* support, Trump or Hillary?" My answer is the same, "The American Legion supports veterans."

While a lot of organizations claim nonpartisanship, it is a mandate that is enshrined in The American Legion's Constitution and is backed up by the examples set forth by our World War I veteran founders.

During one of the earliest meetings of The American Legion in 1919, a movement was afoot to nominate Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., as our first national commander. A World War I hero and the son of a former president, "T.R. Jr." was widely perceived to have political ambitions of his own and possibly follow in his father's footsteps to the White House. A term as national commander would be a nice steppingstone for the young Republican.

But Roosevelt would have none of it. Over shouts of "We Want Teddy," Roosevelt told the delegates, "I wish to withdraw my name for a number of reasons... We are gathered together for a very high purpose. I want every American through the length and breadth of this land to realize that there is not a man in this caucus who is seeking anything for himself, personally, but that he is simply working for the good of the entire situation."

Roosevelt knew that the best way for The American Legion to advance its pillars of fighting for a strong national defense, caring for veterans, establishing wholesome youth programs and

promoting Americanism was to avoid partisanship and political labels.

While many Democrats, Republicans, and Independents have been active in The American Legion throughout our history, the organization is only beholden to “God and Country,” the two entities that are emblazoned on the back of every membership card. We endorse no political office seeker nor any political party. We operate no political action committee and contribute to no campaign.

This does not mean that we are not engaged in the democratic process. Far from it. During election years, we routinely invite the Republican and Democratic nominees for president to address our national convention. Only time constraints prevent us from inviting the numerous independent and third party candidates as well.

The American Legion is concerned that the candidates have barely uttered a word about veterans’ issues during any of the presidential or vice presidential debates. This comes at a time when an estimated 20 veterans a day commit suicide, more than 80,000 veterans have waited five years or longer to have their claims appeals decided and problems abound with the much ballyhooed Veterans Choice program.

Moreover, ISIS, North Korea, Iran, China and Russia dominate headlines, while lawmakers and the White House continue to fund our military at pre-World War II levels. Recent terrorist attacks by immigrants in Washington state, New York City and Minnesota demonstrate that the government still has some deadly holes in its vetting process.

Veterans care deeply about the security of this country. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t have served. In our all-volunteer force, the care and well-being of these veterans is the cost of war and fielding a strong defense.

The American Legion is not interested in which candidate “wins” on election day. We are instead encouraging candidates to follow Roosevelt’s example and work for “the good of the entire situation.”

When that happens, America wins.

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*Charles Schmidt is the national commander of the 2.2 million member American Legion, [www.legion.org](http://www.legion.org).*

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