

It's your future; vote for it



By Master Sgt. Lisa Hunter

The American Revolution and the signing of the U.S. Constitution symbolized America's independence and set the stage for a democratic government in which the President would be chosen by a vote of the people. It wasn't until February 1870 that the 15th Amendment gave African Americans the right to vote. Fifty years later, in 1920, the 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote.

Since the American Revolution, Americans have been fighting for their rights to vote for a democratic government, a Constitutional right American Soldiers are ready to defend any day. In today's world, American Soldiers aren't only defending democracy in America; they are helping to establish democracy in Iraq.

"You can use the example of what we're doing in Iraq right now as an example of why Soldiers need to vote," explained Sergeant Maj. of the Army Kenneth Preston. "Right now, you have Soldiers over there that are giving 25 million Iraqis the greatest gift of all – their freedom."

In 2000, 130 million Americans were registered to vote. Of that

number, 111 million actually voted, according to U.S. Census Bureau. Approximately 1.4 million servicemembers and 1.3 million family members were eligible to vote, according to James H. Davis, the Army Voting Action Officer. If every eligible servicemember and military family member voted, they would represent more than 4 percent of the total ballots cast in that national election.

To ensure that every Soldier, family member and DoD civilian has the opportunity to make his or her voice heard in future elections, the Army has launched this year's voter campaign slogan: "It's your future. Vote for it."

"Historically, Soldiers try to stay out of the politics side of the house," Preston explained. "Because we are Soldiers and we follow the orders of the President of the United States as our commander in chief. We have a tendency to stay out of the political battle that takes place between opponents who are competing for the presidency. I think it's important that Soldiers understand the views of those who are competing for that position, so that their voices can be heard through their votes, based on where the support for them and their military career can best be heard.

"The Army's Voting Assistance Program aims to ensure that Soldiers, their families and the DoD civilians overseas can exercise their right to vote," Davis said. Those eligible to vote via absentee ballot can apply by completing the federal postcard application, Standard Form 76, which can be obtained from the Unit Voting Assistance Officer. Instructions are also available at the Federal Voting Assistance Program's Web site, <http://www.fvap.gov>.

"Not only does this register them for an absentee ballot, but it also registers them to vote in federal, state and local elections," Davis said. "It takes care of everything in one step." Davis recommends that Soldiers send in the federal postcard every year because they may have had an address change since the last election.

Soldiers may only register to vote in their state of legal residence. Soldiers may change their state of legal residence each time they transfer, but they can only have one legal residence at a time.

VOTE!

The Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act requires states to allow absent military voters and Americans living overseas to use absentee ballots in elections for federal office; however, a few states have extended this right to state and local elections as well, according to Davis.

Typically, Americans who have applied for absentee ballots receive their ballots approximately a month before the election. If they don't receive their ballots, those who are overseas can use the Federal Write-in Application Ballot, Standard Form 186. While the SF 186 is primarily for federal elections, some states do accept it, Davis said. The SF 186 allows citizens to write in their votes and send them in by deadline. Registered voters who do not receive their absentee ballots can obtain an SF 186 from their unit's voting assistance officer.

Each Army unit and each Army installation is required to appoint a voting assistance officer (VAO). The VAO's primary mission is the traditional voting assistance provided to Soldiers, their family members and DA civilians who are stationed overseas. The VAO can distribute the Federal Post Card Application, a postage-paid form that potential voters complete to register to vote via absentee ballot. The form also provides local election officials with the absentee voter's mailing address so he or she can mail out the actual absentee ballot. The VAO can assist Soldiers in filling out the postcard which must be completed and mailed in no later than Aug. 15.

The second mission of the VAO is to educate every Soldier about the importance and usefulness of voting and the

opportunities they have to participate in the voting franchise if they so desire, Davis explained. "The voting assistance officer's goal is to inform people on how to vote, who to go see and make them aware," he said. "It is important that every American citizen of voting age votes. Voting is how you influence who is in charge of your quality of life. It is your entitlement as an American citizen."

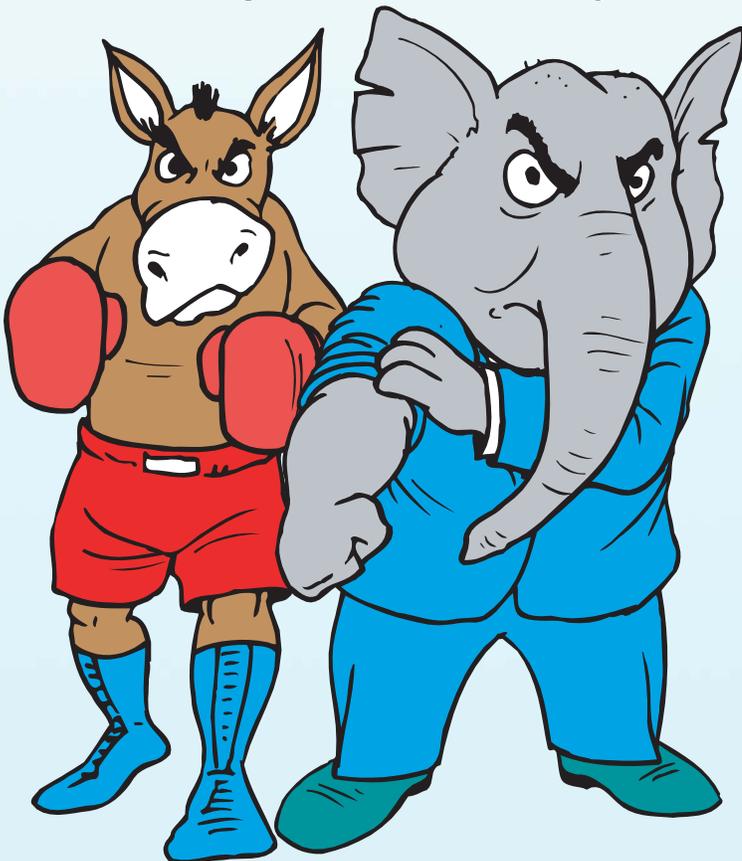
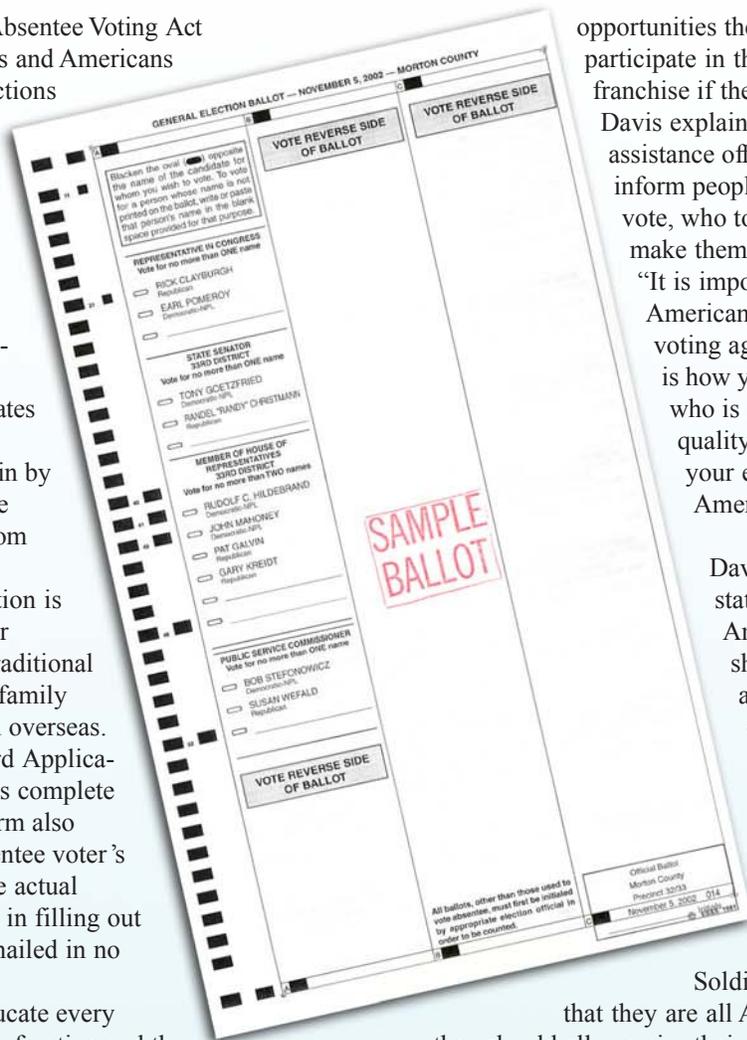
Preston echoed Davis' comments, stating that every American Soldier should learn about the candidates' platforms and exercise his or her right to vote.

"My message to all of the

Soldiers out there is

that they are all Americans and they should all exercise their right to vote,"

the Sergeant Major of the Army said. "Those who are deployed in Iraq are serving as great role models for the Iraqi people as they walk the streets and show the great ethnic diversity in our ranks: different cultures, different ethnic backgrounds and different religions, and how all of us who wear the U.S. Army nametag can live and work together. They are already setting a great example and I would tell them to continue to set that example and vote." (*Army News Service reporter, Andrea Takash, contributed to this story.*)



FOR MORE INFORMATION

visit...

Legal services

<http://www.jagcnet.army.mil>

Political activities and campaigning

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Federal Voting Assistance Program

<http://www.fvap.gov>

Federal Election Commission

<http://www.fec.gov>

This site offers an online Citizen's Guide

<http://www.fec.gov/citizen-guide.html>