



Guest Editorial – February 11, 2007
Secretary of State Mike Coffman

The Military and Overseas Absentee Voting bill

As a combat veteran and Colorado's Secretary of State, I want to ensure that every eligible member of our armed forces, who calls Colorado home, has the opportunity to vote. We should make sure that those who are willing to make tremendous sacrifices to defend our freedoms are never denied their voting privilege.

House Bill 1149, the Military and Overseas Absentee Voting bill, will help ensure that those who defend our right to vote are themselves able to cast a ballot.

This bill will help soldiers and Marines serving in a combat zone to more easily apply for an Absentee Ballot. When faced with the day-to-day stress of surviving in a combat zone, it is not uncommon to forget to apply for an Absentee Ballot until days before the election – which would be too late to send the application by mail and receive the ballot in time to vote.

Soldiers and Marines in forward operating bases do not have access to fax machines and they lack access to computers to download the application, so it can be signed, scanned and emailed to the county clerk in time to receive an Absentee Ballot. They would be unable to vote in these remote locations if they had to rely on receiving and returning the application for an Absentee Ballot via regular mail.

HB 1149 seeks to give a commissioned officer, or a voting assistance officer, the authority to submit an unsigned Absentee Ballot request on behalf of a soldier or Marine who is unable to personally complete and send in the application.

It is an issue dear to me, as I have firsthand experience with the challenges our military men and women face when trying to vote from a combat zone.

In October 2005, while serving with the US Marine Corps in Iraq, I was assigned to a base camp outside of Fallujah. My mission was to help the Iraqis with their October 15th referendum on a draft constitution.

I was so focused on helping the Iraqis exercise their voting rights that I almost forgot about the November 2005 election in Colorado.

Concerned that there was not enough time to mail in my request for an Absentee Ballot, I emailed my county clerk and asked for advice. My only recourse was to apply for the Absentee Ballot by fax.

But I was in a combat zone and didn't have access to a fax machine. I had access to email, however Colorado's antiquated election rules did not allow a clerk to accept an Absentee Ballot through electronic means.

Therefore, I was unable to vote.

The outdated rule that prevented me from voting has since been changed, so a soldier or Marine in a similar circumstance would be able to apply for an absentee ballot via email.

But this experience, and my next assignment in a remote forward operating base in Iraq, made me realize that more must be done to help our military men and women vote.

I began a new assignment in the Western Euphrates River Valley as a civil affairs governance officer, and was responsible for assisting with the establishment of interim local governments in Haditah, Haqlaniyah and Barwana.

The Marines in the river valley were spread out in small forward operating bases. They shared these small compounds with Iraqi soldiers and had none of the conveniences of the larger, more secure, base camps: mail was slow, access to email was limited, and there was no capability to download documents from a computer.

If, like me, these Marines forgot to send in a request for an Absentee Ballot by mail in sufficient time to get their ballot, they would not be able to vote.

That's why HB 1149 is so necessary, and why I was proud to stand with the bill sponsors, Representative Joe Rice (D-Littleton) and Senator Steve Ward (R-Littleton) – both veterans themselves with service in Iraq and Afghanistan respectively – in support of the bill this week when it passed unanimously out of committee.

The bill will be voted on by the full House on Monday, and I hope you will contact your representative and urge a YES vote. A vote for HB 1149 is a vote to give our armed forces the ability to fully exercise their voting rights, while they so bravely protect ours.

Sec. Coffman retired from the U.S. Army Reserve in 1979 and transferred to the U.S. Marine Corps. He left active duty in 1982 and continued his service in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserves until he returned to active duty in 1990 to serve in Operation Desert Storm. He once again entered active duty in 2005 and served in Iraq.