

SPEAK OUT

Speaker's Stand ... Warriors deserve their jobs

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"I'm sorry. You can't have your job back."

These words settle like an unexpected storm cloud; and the tough veteran, grizzled from 15 months at war, blinks back tears. This can't be right. Only a month ago, he was greeted at the airport with banners, smiles, hugs, TV cameras and welcome-home wishes from a crowd of people. He was a proud servant of our country, a patriot who actually was willing to lay it all on the line. And now, excited about his future back home, his ability to provide for himself and his family has been denied by eight short words strung into the most terrible sentence he never imagined.

Surely, this can't happen in America, and certainly not in Alabama. It does. As thousands of veterans return from overseas, most of them return to the life and jobs they left behind. Unfortunately, however, too many of them run into employers that will not re-employ them. Typically, however, these companies are wrong.

President Clinton signed the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) into law in 1994. Veterans returning to Alabama and the companies who have the privilege of existing in this state need to know their rights and abide by their obligations under this law.

Generally, you are entitled to your former job if you were in the uniformed services, the company knew you were going into the service, you weren't gone more than five years, you were honorably discharged, and you asked for your old job within 90 days of discharge. But your former employer says it hired someone else — or says you can't do your old job because the IED resulted in the loss of your arm — or says you were gone for more than five years because of the year you were in the hospital recovering from your injuries. These excuses don't fly.

The rights of veterans to their old jobs override the non-veterans who replaced them because, as one court put it, this law is construed liberally to benefit people who left their private lives to serve this country. If you are disabled, your former employer must find a similar position equivalent in seniority, status and pay. If you can't re-apply for your old job within 90 days because you're in the hospital, you can have up to two years to do so.

This law gives veterans the ability to talk soft and carry a big stick. It requires companies that have benefited from your hard work in the past to abide by your right to continue that same hard work when you return. It lets veterans know that our society values their sacrifice and that we are doing more than just putting a yellow ribbon on our car's rear window. It holds violators accountable for turning their backs on the men and women who serve in harm's way. It is only right, and it makes sense. We can be proud of it. Now let's make sure we comply with it.