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UR conference to focus on 'reclaiming our democracy' 15 years after 9/11

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They are not easy things to talk about.

But on Saturday, Larry Syverson will tell strangers about the struggle his sons, Army and Navy veterans, have faced in their personal lives and relationships, as well as the strain imposed on his family as a result of their multiple deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

“It’s been very tough for our family, and I just think it’s important that Americans know what all these deployments have done to families,” said Syverson, a 67-year-old geologist with the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality and outspoken opponent of the wars launched in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. “I know we’re not alone in what our family’s going through.”

Syverson, who has been demonstrating against the wars since 2003, will be among a slate of speakers Saturday at the University of Richmond for a conference organized by the American Civil Liberties Union of Virginia and the Richmond Peace Education Center.

All three of his sons who have deployed have struggled with post-traumatic stress in one form or another, Syverson said.

“We’re a poster family for what these multiple deployments can do to a family,” he said. “Sometimes keeping quiet about it is even worse and not having people know what these families are going through.”

The conference, “Reclaiming Our Democracy: 15 Years After 9/11,” will cover such topics as government surveillance and threats to privacy, the global war on terror and its racial components, and the militarization of domestic police forces.

Another speaker, Adam Bates, a lawyer and policy analyst with the Cato Institute’s Project on Criminal Justice, says it’s time to talk about the balance of individual liberties and security, including the Patriot Act, electronic surveillance as well as federal programs that have steered military equipment to law enforcement agencies over the past 15 years.

“I do think post-9/11 our policy swung far away from the Constitution, away from a lot of our foundational values and legal principles that protect individual liberty,” Bates said. “I think there’s very little evidence to suggest 15 years later that we’re safer because of this. ...

Hopefully, we're ready to admit as a country that we didn't get a good return on the investment of all these counterterrorism policies."