

# **O MY VETERANS, PASSING TO BURIAL**



## **MEMORIAL DAY 2005**

(Acknowledgment of introduction, distinguished guests, officers and members of the DAV and Auxiliary, and others who are present.)

It was the height of the Civil War. And Walt Whitman, who was quickly becoming America's best-loved poet, knew the soldiers well.

He had visited them on the front lines. And every day after his job in our nation's capitol, he bought candy or tobacco and visited the Army hospitals.

You could joke that our greatest poet was a model for the VA Voluntary Service Program. But seriously, each time a soldier was lost, Walt Whitman's heart was pierced with pain.

Listen as he expresses that pain in a poem about a funeral for two soldiers killed on the field of battle:

*O my veterans passing to burial!  
What have I also to give you.*

*The moon gives you light,  
And the bugles and the drums give you music,  
And my heart, O my soldiers, my veterans,  
My heart gives you love.*

Those are powerful lines. The image of the funeral parade is vivid. The emotions are intense.

On Memorial Day, we open the gates of our hearts and allow those same feelings to flow freely. They're forceful feelings.

Our spirits are filled with devotion for those who sacrificed the breath of life in the cause of freedom.

Today we drop the cynical mask of our modern age and look into the face of nobility.

And it truly is nobility that stirred the hearts of those who have worn the uniforms of our nation's armed forces ... from its earliest times right up to the present day.

That gallantry shines through with particular force in the lives of the ordinary young Americans who died for freedom ... most of them in the bloom of youth, but some in middle age.

Not quite so obvious among the dead are those who came home sick or wounded, only to die months or years later of causes related to war. Theirs too are noble lives. Theirs too are lives we remember today.

And each of these lives should be recalled with the depth and the passion that Walt Whitman brought to his poetry.

You may tell me that you're not a poet. But I believe in the greatness of your American heart. And that is what matters.

You have chosen to observe Memorial Day because your spirit is moved by the same vast love that flowed through the pen of Walt Whitman.

As you honor our nation's war dead today, please honor that greatness of your own heart as well.

Your dedication to those who served is one element in the alloy of the American Spirit – an alloy that can bear any weight and stand any stress.

And surely, there is great need for people to stand up with true American Spirit today.

It is a time of war, with troops deployed on two fronts of active combat – one in Iraq, the other in Afghanistan.

Our men and women face the threat of hostility in many other hotspots around the world, as well.

Opinions about the war in Iraq may vary, and that's okay.

America is the world's beacon of democracy after all. Americans can think as they wish ... say what they want ... and vote as they please.

These are principles that make America great – ideals we veterans risked our lives to defend.

But I'm pleased to see Americans united on one idea. They are committed to support the men and women of our armed forces. And that rightfully translates into support for our nation's veterans.

They might not be able to raise their voices in language as poetic as Walt Whitman's, but their sentiments are the same. Their thoughts echo his words, saying:

*And our hearts, O our soldiers, our veterans, our hearts give you love.*

No matter how individual Americans feel about the war, they get angry when they feel the troops aren't getting what they need.

And now that they're beginning to see veterans getting the short end of the stick, they're stirred up about that too.

A recent survey of the American people showed that 95 percent strongly support veterans' programs. They're in tune with something President Teddy Roosevelt said a hundred years ago:

*“A man who is good enough to shed his blood for his country, is good enough to be given a square deal afterward.”*

Some of our nation's elected leaders don't see things this way. They don't reflect the will of the American people when it comes to the men and women who fought our wars.

We must remind them of Teddy Roosevelt's commitment to those who risked life and limb for freedom.

I wonder if a curator at the Hirshhorn Museum wanted to help a few people in Washington remember their obligations when deciding to hang a painting called “The Survivor.”

This painting portrays a disabled World War I veteran, but the wheelchair isn’t the first thing you notice about the man, sitting there in his uniform.

You notice how old he looks, even though this painting was done just 16 years after the war. You notice his loneliness.

The Hirshhorn Museum is on the Washington Mall. Hanging just a few blocks from the White House and the hallowed halls of Congress, this painting is filled with quiet accusation.

And in official Washington, its meaning is as fresh today as it was in 1936.

Oh, our political leaders know what to say on occasions like this. On Memorial Day, they'll praise those who gave their lives for freedom. As the death toll in Iraq continues to climb, they'll have special words for our latest war dead.

They may even say a few kind things about those who came home disabled from Afghanistan and Iraq.

If they're at all wise, they'll look beyond the Pentagon figures, which include only those officially listed as "wounded in action."

They'll note that tens of thousands have come home from war, sick and otherwise disabled – tens of thousands not counted in press releases handed to news reporters.

But many politicians would rather not study the numbers that closely. It would make it too difficult to

stomach the veterans' budget the White House has asked them to accept.

The Disabled American Veterans has called this “one of the most tight-fisted, miserly budgets for veterans in recent memory.”

And we're not alone in speaking out so bluntly.

The VFW, American Legion, AMVETS, and many other veterans' organization have risen in a unified chorus. All have stated that the White House budget for veterans' programs falls way short of the mark.

Will this budget get through Congress?

Well, the leadership of the dominant party has done its best to remove any rocks in the road.

But we cannot allow an administration of either party to turn veterans into beasts of burden, forced to carry the load of federal spending cuts.

Unlike Teddy Roosevelt, some folks in Washington want to view the VA as just another set of domestic programs ... perhaps even welfare programs.

But the old Rough Rider had led troops into combat, and he was right: *Veterans' programs are a cost of war.*

Any other view is short-sighted. And let's look at who gets hurt when budget cutters lose their glasses.

One of the DAV's national leaders recently visited a military hospital and talked about meeting a young soldier who had lost both hands when a homemade bomb exploded in Iraq.

The blast severely injured his face. No matter how many plastic surgeries he gets, his appearance will never be the same.

Sixteen years from now, I don't want to see that young man in a painting of a lonely, forgotten veteran on the

walls of the Hirshhorn Museum. But if things don't change, there's danger.

If our politicians let this man down – if they let him down *in any way* – their pious words on Memorial Day do no honor to our nation's war dead.

Our country's leaders mock the honored dead if they don't care for those who come home sick and wounded from military service.

They disgrace the dead when they twist statistics to hide the true human cost of war. And this happens when they disguise the real number of men and women who come home disabled.

If political or military leaders are playing this kind of game, why are they doing it? Are they trying to dodge the obligation Teddy Roosevelt called on our nation to observe?

And if they're playing this game, anything they say about the war-dead on Memorial Day rings hollow in our ears.

I call on our nation's leaders to rise to a higher standard ... the standard met by American citizens who gather in cemeteries and courthouse lawns today.

I call them to the standard set by Walt Whitman, when he wrote:

*The moon gives you light,  
And the bugles and the drums give you music,  
And my heart, O my soldiers, my veterans,  
My heart gives you love.*

In the words of Whitman and in the hearts of our citizens, there are no boundaries to the respect for our veterans. The American people do not ask how much our veterans cost and is that cost too high.

They only say, “These men and women fought and died and bled for us. They gave us the gift of freedom. What do they need?”

If we are going to send the flower of America off to war, we must not say to them:

*“We’ll give you the best for two years. But then we’ll send you to a second-best system with all the other veterans.*

*“You’ll wait years for your claim to be decided. Your health care will be under-funded.*

*“And when that nice carbon-fiber leg breaks down, your government might not be able to replace it.”*

If we asked our veterans to give only their best when we called them to arms, we must be prepared to give them only the best for the rest of their lives.

Then – and only then – will our nation have honored those whose flag-draped caskets are coming home even today from the fields of battle.

(pause briefly)

“O my veterans passing to burial, what have I also to give you?” asks Walt Whitman. Today, you have given them your love and your respect by observing Memorial Day.

I thank you for that ... and for your patriotism. I thank you for your commitment to the men and women of our armed forces.

May God bless America.



For the information of speakers and others who may wish to know, the following is the complete text of the poem quoted in these remarks.

**Dirge for Two Veterans**  
Walt Whitman

The last sunbeam  
Lightly falls from the finish'd Sabbath,  
On the pavement here, and there beyond it is looking,  
Down on a new-made double grave.

Lo, the moon ascending,  
Up from the east the silvery round moon,  
Beautiful over the housetops, ghastly, phantom moon,  
Immense and silent moon.

I see a sad procession,  
And I hear the sound of coming full-key'd bugles,  
All the channels of the city streets they're flooding,  
As with voices and with tears.

I hear the great drums pounding,  
And the small drums steady whirring,  
And every blow of the great convulsive drums,  
Strikes me through and through.

For the son is brought with the father,  
(In the foremost ranks of the fierce assault they fell,  
Two veterans son and father dropt together,  
And the double grave awaits them.)

Now nearer blow the bugles,  
And the drums strike more convulsive,  
And the daylight o'er the pavement quite has faded,  
And the strong death-march enwraps me.

In the eastern sky upbuoying,  
The sorrowful vast phantom moves illumin'd  
('Tis the mother's large transparent face,  
In heaven brighter growing.)

O strong death-march you please me!  
O moon immense with your silvery face you soothe me!  
O my soldiers twain! O my veterans passing to burial!  
What have I also to give you.

The moon gives you light,  
And the bugles and the drums give you music,  
And my heart, O my soldiers, my veterans,  
My heart gives you love.